

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

Here at Black Library Towers we're all dedicated followers of fashion. Back in the mid-seventies Marc, our publisher, could be seen strolling down Portobello Road with a safety pin through his nose long before any punk bands jumped on the bandwagon. Our resident design guru, Darius, has been telling everybody that brown is the new black for years and even his sidekick, Dan, has a shiny shirt that he airs whenever the Black Library have a staff night out.

What does this have to do with Inferno!? Quite a lot actually, because as new assistant editor Matt (who? see below.) and myself read through our submissions pile we start to notice trends developing. Back when White Dwarf started running their Index Astartes feature, you could guarantee that two to three months afterwards our submissions tray would be bursting with stories based upon the particular Space Marine chapter they had featured. The same is true whenever the Studio release a new codex or army book – within weeks we're bombarded with story ideas featuring whichever troop type is flavour of that particular month.

Every once in a while a particular army or race will come back into fashion, in much the same way as Jackie-O sunglasses or tank tops did over the past few years. Currently back in vogue are tyranids. Despite being more than eighteen months on from the codex release, the past few months have seen a massive upsurge in 'nid related adventures. This issue sees the welcome return of Sandy Mitchell – a name familiar to anybody who read the first batch of Games Workshop fiction from the early nineties – and guess what? That's right, tyranids play a major part in his story, *Fight or Flight*. Next issue we've got twice as much chitinous fun as both Graham McNeill and Dan Abnett bring us twisted tyranid tales and Graham even goes so far as to pitch Uriel Ventris against the hive mind in his forthcoming novel, *Warriors of Ulthamar*.

Of course, the danger for us is that, by the time you guys get to read these stories the fickle tide of fashion may have already turned and new trends will be starting to make their presence felt in our submissions tray. Based on recent evidence, I can confidently predict that the fashions for

the forthcoming season will be pirates, undead and tight t-shirts worn with baggy black trousers, and for next spring I can see stripy pants, eye patches and plenty of slaying being *de rigueur* for the stylish Inferno! reader.

Meanwhile, as I mentioned earlier, there's a new face here at Inferno! Mr Matt Ralphs has joined us as our new assistant editor and is our first line of defence in the constant war to reply to submissions from prospective authors. Matt first came to our attention thanks to a really rather good Warhammer 40,000 story that he was working on before we snatched him away from the forces of Chaos and shackled him to a desk here at the Black Library. Who knows, if he can free himself from his chains for long enough he might even finish the darn thing.

Welcome aboard, Matt!



Christian Dunn
Editor

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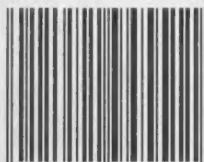
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BRIGHT AS A serrated knife, daylight winking off its ridged bows, the Imperial barge fell away behind them until it was just a dwindling star beginning to set in the western sky. Far below, the shadow of their landing ship jittered and skipped as it pursued them across the parched, pink wilds of Iorgu.

The land was cracked like scurf-skin, or like beach sand that has baked and crazed in the sun after the tide has withdrawn. Priad knew enough about Iorgu to understand that these seabeds had been dry for aeons and no tide would ever return now. Every few dozen kilometres they overflow a desert town or settlement: little clusters of white domes like brooches of pearls pressed into the pink dunes, or strung out along the lips of red-rock canyons, bone-white as crusts of air-dried salt.

The lander shivered as altitude thrusters crimped and fired, nudging them northward. As the angle changed, rungs of golden sunlight stole in through the portholes and washed like slow liquid across the faces of the men on the starboard side.

The Marines of Damocles Squad were seated in restraint-thrones, back to back, five looking to port, five to starboard. They wore full astartes wargear, except that their heads were bare. The ten, grim-visored helmets were suspended in hydraulic clamps above their thrones. Their weapons were locked in racks underneath their arm-braces.

Priad, sergeant and heart of Damocles, slowly tore his gaze away from the desiccated landscape flashing by below and consulted the luminous red screen of the data-plate above his window. Bearing, height, airspeed, time to set-down...

'Two minutes,' he said. 'Activate armour.'

A series of low whines answered him as ten M37 dorsal-mounted power units woke up. Priad immediately felt an enervating vigour throb in his plasteel-sheathed limbs; the reassuring surge of inhuman strength.

'Is vital monitoring satisfactory, Brother Khiron?'

'I have ten steady life-beats, brother-sergeant,' replied the squad's Apothecary promptly.

'Ninety seconds,' said Priad. 'Lock armour.'

Hydraulics hissed and clanked. The ten helmets lowered onto the heads of the Marines. Most of the men wore their hair tied back or braided over their scalps, ready for helmet-fit, but Priad noticed how young Dyognes deftly scooped his glossy mane of black ringlets up under the lip of the descending helmet before it met the neck-seal and secured. Priad's own helmet clicked into place and abruptly he was breathing cool, internal air-supply and seeing everything through the bright green display of his visor optics.

'Auto weapons check,' Priad instructed, his voice now an electronic murmur carried by the intersuit vox. The individual data-plates before them scrolled with diagnostic reports fed from their racked arsenal.

'Run auto-sense target trial,' he said.

The plates now flickered with rapid test patterns that measured and calibrated each marine's targeting systems. Through his visor optics, Priad locked up six vari-range practice icons as they appeared on his data-plate, freezing each one in turn with a hard, white graphic cross. Satisfied, the plate responded by displaying a default aquila symbol. He muttered a prayer of thanks.

'Set-down positions,' Priad said finally.

The thrones tightened their grips, clamping limbs, torsos and necks and rotating slightly into the lock-up position so that each Marine was firmly cradled and tilted back. As the thrones reclined, segmented blast shutters closed like eyelids over the window ports, shutting out the light.

BLUE BLOOD

AN IRON SPIKES STORY

BY DAN ABNETT

Thirty seconds. Priad switched his visor display to access the view through the lander's forward pict-readers. He saw emerald crags and a lime-green sky rushing past him, overlaid with rapidly changing graphics of trajectory, contour and flightpath prediction. A column of numerical data crawled up the left side of the panorama. Priad knew the emerald rocks were really pink and the lime sky really smoke-blue, but when the city came into view at last, he longed to know what colour that truly was.

Outposts at first. Wide-spaced lines of towers set in the ragged basalt like fangs rising from a meatless jawbone. Thin ribbons of highways radiating out from the city. An outer ring-wall, tall and crenelated, then a great, shadow-filled ditch that the highways crossed on stilted stone viaducts. Steps of stone-built walls forming irrigated terraces teeming with lush doum trees.

Then Iorgu City. Five hundred metre curtain walls, sloping gently inwards, smooth as ice. Defence towers sprouting like stalagmites from the wall's upper levels. Beyond the cyclopean wall, the hazy vista of the inner city: towers and steeples and domes clustered around the gigantic landmarks of the Imperial Basilica, the Royal Palace, the steeple of the Astropathica and, in the distance, the Sacred Mound, the only soft, organic shape in sight. The city was so vast that Priad was soon unable to take it all in with one look, despite the one-eighty degree sweep of his scope.

A jolt. Braking jets. A rolling sensation of weightlessness as they decelerated hard, swinging south on a hard, sustained burn of vertical thrusters. Now some of the towers were climbing past them, dwarfing them. Down below, on a wide platform of rockcrete ninety metres above the city floor, a star of landing lamps began to strobe-flash, the lights pulsing along the arms of the star towards the centre.

Another judder of jets. A lurch.

Fifty metres. Twenty. Ten. Two.

There was a noise like an iron shutter falling, a violent jarring, and they were down.

'Damocles! Disengage and deploy!' Priad cried.

The thrones slammed back to vertical. Power feeds, monitor plugs and restraints disengaged in a series of pings and clangs. The hatches opened, lifting like trapdoors, five along each flank of the lander, and daylight flooded in.

Sliding their weapons from the throne-side racks, Damocles squad strode out into the bright heat on the landing pad.

This wasn't a combat zone, and they weren't expecting trouble, but even so they dismounted from the lander in standard assault pattern, covering each address with their bolters, sweeping and hunting for targets until Priad gave the word and they locked off their weapons and holstered them.

The five men on each side turned and marched around behind the lander, coming together like the teeth of a zip to form a precise double-file.

Dust swirled around them. They waited a moment as Brother Andromak raised the Chapter standard and fixed it between his shoulder blades so that it fluttered above his head. Then Khiron performed the water rites.

'Advance!' said Priad, as soon as the ritual was done. Plasteel-shod feet, marching in perfect synchronicity, rang on the rockcrete. The great brass iris hatch on the edge of the pad opened as they strode towards it. A tall, white-bearded man in an ornately braided dark jacket and white jodhpurs came out to meet them, flanked by an escort of sixty heavy guardsmen in patterned silk, spiked helmets with silver aventails, and salute-raised linstocks. The guardsman immediately to the officer's right held up a massive parasol of white canvas and rosewood to provide shade for his commander.

'I am Seraskier Duxl of the Interior Guard,' the bearded man said. His faced was lined from years in the sun, and nictitating augmetic filters of smoked plastic had slid down over his eyeballs. 'It is my honour to welcome the hallowed Astartes Iron Snakes to Iorgu City.'

'The honour is mine, Seraskier,' Priad saluted, switching his suit-vox to speaker. 'We have come to do homage to your king,' his voice rumbled across the open pad.



♦ I HAD WISHED for more,' Priad had said in the dim, tranquil vaults of the Chapter House on Karybdis. 'Six months have I spent, reforging Damocles into a fighting unit, and we are ready. But the inductees, Dyognes and Aekon, have never seen actual combat, and Khiron, though I count myself blessed to have him as apothecary, has not worked with the squad in the field. I had wished... I was hoping... for a combat mission.'

'I trust, brother-sergeant, that every Iron Snake hopes his next task will be a combat mission.' Profoundly deep, and without the merest glimmer of light, the voice of the Chapter Master had welled across Priad like the deep, oceanic volume of proud Ithaka.

'Of course, my master,' Priad had said hurriedly. He had not intended offence.

'We are sworn to duty, the duty of the Astartes, enfranchised to us by the God-Emperor of our race. We take each duty as it comes, and we do not question it.'

Priad had bowed his head. 'No, of course not, my master.'

For a long moment, Chapter Master Seydon of the Iron Snakes had remained silent, a gigantic shadow in the dim light of the temple.

'Our duty is to serve the Emperor,' Seydon had intoned suddenly. 'Our specific duty is to protect the Reef Stars. Iorgu is a principal world in that region. A proud bastion of Imperial power. I lament that the long, wise rule of Queen Gartrude had come to an end. It is appropriate for our Chapter to send an emissary guard to attend the coronation of her successor. It would be disrespectful for the Iron Snakes to ignore the event.'

'I realise that, my master.'

'I have chosen Damocles to perform this duty. To march in the coronation train. To witness the crowning of the new king. To represent our interests and demonstrate both our unswerving loyalty and the permanence of our vigil. Do you question that choice?'

'No, my master. I was only saying that I would have wished for something less... ceremonial.'

'I would have tasked you to combat, Priad, but the Reef is quiet for now. I know how you yearn to baptise and test your squad in fire. Do this for me now and I will find you your crucible. How say you?'

Priad's pulse had been thudding in his temples. He had managed a smile. 'Damocles will go to Iorgu, my master,' he had promised.



WE WILL GET fat and slow,' Brother Xander blurted, dropping his helmet and then his gauntlets onto a chaise. Until Dyognes and Aekon had been inducted, Xander had been the youngest of Damocles, and he still liked to act the firebrand.

'Fat and slow?' echoed Brother Pindor as he disengaged his own helmet. 'Really?'

'Figuratively,' snapped Xander. 'Pageants. Pomp. Feasting. This isn't what we were made for.'

Scyllon and Andromak growled their agreement.

'I tell you what, Xander,' said Khiron, disconnecting his gauntlets and flexing his bared hands thoughtfully, 'this is precisely what we were made for.'

Xander frowned at the Apothecary. Khiron had an excellent reputation, and no one in Damocles Squad questioned his ability, but he was still a newcomer, a stranger in the place of beloved Memnes. They were still getting used to his straight-talking wisdom.

'How so?' Xander asked.

'I suppose,' said Khiron, 'that you long for battle?'

'That is our calling,' Xander nodded.

'When the God-Emperor wishes it. It is our forte but not our calling.'

Khiron turned to face Xander. The young, dark-braided warrior had a proud, glacial face and towered a full head's height above the grey-haired Apothecary with his narrow eyes and jut-jawed, bear-trap frown.

'Our calling is the Emperor's service, brother-boy. He wills that we fight, we fight. He wills it that we stand respect to a coronation, we stand respect. He wills it that we support a toppling temple on our shoulders, we brace and take the weight. And if he tells us to strip naked and stand on our heads, that we do too. That is what we were made for. To serve the will of the Emperor.'

Xander looked away. 'I stand chastised, Brother Apothecary Khiron.'

Khiron chuckled and smacked the warrior's arm plates. 'You just stand, Xander. That's all he asks.'

'The area is secure,' Natus reported to Priad. The sergeant nodded. The area was secure. The area was also dripping with opulence. Five communicating private apartments on the sixtieth floor of the Iorguan Palace, draped in silks and coshiori embroiderwork, lit by glow globes and glass-fluted wick-lamps. Every item of furniture was gilded and carved. Vast windows of tinted glass overlooked the city sprawl below.

'We are their honoured guests,' Priad murmured.

'What is... this?' asked Brother Aekon, regarding with some confusion a soft heap of cushions and silk-cased bolsters.

'A bed,' replied Priad.

'For sleeping?'

'Indeed. There are ten of them, two in each room.'

'Salt of Ithaka...' Aekon said. 'I would drown in that softness.'

'The Iorguans don't really understand what we are, do they, brother-sergeant?' said Khiron. 'They give us beds and fine state rooms.'

'And food,' said Priad, gesturing to a long side table where platters of fruits, breads and sweetmeats were arrayed. The bio-engineered metabolisms of the Astartes warriors could go without conventional rest or regular food for weeks. If pushed, a twenty minute restorative nap, which could be taken upright with armour locked, and an intravenous nutrient pack, could prolong their operational capacity.

'We are gods to them,' Priad said. 'Legends from the stars. Most citizens of the Imperium go their whole lifetimes without seeing one of our kind in the flesh. They presume us to be men, yet fear us as deities of war.'

'I would not disabuse them of either notion,' said Khiron.

'Maybe you see now why our attendance here carries so much weight,' Priad said to Xander. 'Why even ten of our Chapter coming here and paying homage to the new king is a significant event. The folk of Iorgu will remember this time. The day the Adeptus Astartes set foot on Iorguan soil in person to acknowledge their king.'

AT NIGHTFALL, a nervous troop of palace guards came and summoned them to audience. The sky outside had turned purple and the golden towers of the city glimmered in the last rays of the setting sun.

Damocles had polished their armour to a sheen and wiped away the last traces of dust. A terrible hush fell on the huge audience hall as they marched in, three abreast, with Priad at the head. Five thousand people – nobility, dignitaries, city lords and servants – gazed at them in awe. Trumpets suddenly blared a fanfare and many people jumped.

Led by Seraskier Duxl, a royal party approached to inspect them. Various silk-wrapped nobles with tall, soft hats; beautiful concubines in costumes made only of precious stones; brute bodyguards who looked like youths next to the towering, immobile Marines.

And the king elect: Naldo Benexer Tashari Iorgu Stam, by the grace of the Golden Throne. A boy, Priad noted with disappointment, just a chinless, excited boy with a too-long neck and watery, inbred eyes. The furs and gold that clad him were worth the annual economy of some frontier colonies, and were so heavy, teams of silver-painted children had to carry the train. Naldo himself floated on a suspensor plate that surfed him across the tiled floor.

'I am honoured,' he said, his voice nasal and reedy, 'that you... mighty warriors attend me here.'

'Lord king,' Priad said, tilting his head to look down at his majesty. Priad's words rolled like distant thunder from his suit's speakers, and some of the guests shivered or gasped. 'In the name of Seydon, master of the Iron Snakes, in the name of the God-Emperor of Mankind, and in the name of my beloved Chapter, I greet you and do you homage.'

He knelt, power-armour joints whirring softly. Even on one knee, he was at eye-level with King Elect Naldo. His majesty's face was a pale green blob in Priad's optics. Unbidden, automatic target graphics framed Naldo's visage with white crosshairs. Priad dismissed his visor's kill-shot treasonous suggestion and the icon vanished.

Naldo was looking up and down the ranks of Damocles with adolescent delight. 'You are all the stories speak of... and more! Giant warriors, all identically cast from the same great pattern!'

Priad hesitated. Identical? How could this child not see the differences? Dyognes and Xander tall like oaks, Kules short and broad, old Pindor and the noble bearing of Khiron, Aekon thickset, Natus with his augmetic arm, Scyllon whip-thin and supple as a lance, Andromak sturdy like a sea cliff.

We are meaningless, he thought, a cipher. That's how they all see us. Interchangeable giants, replications without character. The wargear masks us so.

'Rise, warrior,' Naldo said, relishing the opportunity to give a Space Marine an order. Priad got up.

'Join our festivities. Mingle freely.'

The king elect and his entourage moved away. Conversation began to start up again, and musicians began to play.

'Mingle?' Priad voxed suit-to-suit. 'What the hell does that mean?'



THEY STOOD attentive and still for two hours as the gala swirled around them.

Some guests ventured close and admired them as if they were statues. A few stole closer and risked touching their armour for good fortune or simply on a dare.

Damocles didn't move.

Priad spent his time fixing and logging faces. His optic gaze wandered through the thickets of the crowd, recording and tagging each face and figure he saw and adding them to his suit's internal memory. Not only persons, but the structure and dimension of the hall, the number and site of the exits, the position of the band. An Iron Snake was taught to assess and catalogue his location for tactical purposes wherever possible, usually a quick matter of key points. Now he had time to waste.

The number of valves or strings on each instrument. The number of frets. The number of buttons on a jacket or gemstones on a gown train. The number of facets on a wine glass. The number of beads on the chandeliers.

He logged and identified the robust commander of the local PDF, flamboyant in red satin robes. Five subsector governors and their staffs. Lord Militant Farnsey, two Navy commodores and a cluster of Guard officers who, like Damocles, had been sent to the coronation to represent their institutions. The Princess Royal of Cartomax, a beautiful young woman with an augmetically perfect face framed by the gauzy fields of a personal force-veil, and augmetically perfect breasts pushed up and out in a balcony of diamonds. The Imperial Hierarchy, Bishop Osokomo, his bulk supported on grav plates, his extravagant mitre three metres tall. The senior adept of the Guild Astropathicus wearing a holographic face to hide his unseemly third eye. Nine officers of the Navis Nobilite. The chief clerk of the Administratum Iorgu, with sixteen higher recollectors. Six merchant princes.

A man in black robes which did not completely hide his golden prosthetic hand.

Priad jolted.

'Andromak.'

'Brother-sergeant?'

'You have charge here.'

'Yes, sir.'

Priad strode across the packed room. Men and women, the cream of Iorguan society, fled out of his path, aghast that one of the statues was now moving. Priad ignored their whispers and exclamations and headed for the rear exit of the great hall. The man in black robes had made a hasty retreat in that direction.

The outer passageway was dim and quiet, though Priad's optics saw into the shadows as if it was day.

He drew his bolter. An ammo-load tally immediately appeared on his visor display, alongside a floating target cross. He stalked along the passage, studying every centimetre of the lime-cast view, from the dark teal of the coldest, deepest shadows to the fizzling white flares of the lamp reeds.

A tall figure in black stepped out from behind a pillar to face him. Hands – one gloved, one gold – came up and pulled the hood of the black robe down. White hair, an angular, pinch-skinned face.

'Well met, brother-sergeant,' said Inquisitor Mabuse.

'You make no attempt to hide from me?' Priad said, disconcerted, wondering if he should prepare for some ordo trick, some ordo magick.

Mabuse smiled, revealing small, neat white teeth. 'I am an inquisitor, Brother-Sergeant Priad. My business is looking and finding and revealing... and knowing how well others do the same. There is small point in an unaugmented man trying to conceal himself from an Astartes warrior.'

'Yet you fled the hall as soon as I saw you.'

'When we last met, on Ceres, we did not part on cordial terms. I suspected perhaps that, seeing me, you intended me some harm.'

Priad was insulted by the idea. 'I am a servant of the Golden Throne, inquisitor. I do not indulge in spite or petty retribution against another of the Emperor's servants... despite what I might think of them.'

Mabuse nodded. 'Yet... your weapon is drawn and armed and pointing at me.'

Priad realised it was. Annoyed with himself, he locked the safety and holstered the bolter.

'What are you doing here?' he asked bluntly.

'In this passageway? In truth, brother, I withdrew from the hall so that we could speak privately.'

'I meant-'

Mabuse held up his delicate golden hand to interrupt. 'This is important, Priad. Only you know my true name and calling. The court of Iorgu knows me as Sire Damon Taradae, a sericulture merchant. I would like to retain that disguise a while longer.'

'No one will hear the truth from me, or from my men.'

Mabuse nodded again, pleased. 'That is good. Thank you, brother-sergeant.'

'Now will you answer my question less literally?'

'Of course. Come...'

Warily, Priad followed the Inquisitor into an alcove between thick basalt columns where light reeds fizzled and glowed. Mabuse raised his golden hand again, and the little finger detached with a tiny click and hovered beside them at shoulder height on a beam of repulsor energy. Priad's visor-view suddenly fogged and scrambled.

'Open your visor,' he heard Mabuse say, his words dulled by Priad's armour.

Priad undid the magna-lock and removed his helmet, looking down into Mabuse's eyes.

'Don't worry,' Mabuse said, gesturing lightly to his hovering digit. 'It's generating an anti-vox/pict field around us so we can speak openly. There is danger here, Priad.'

'Danger? What danger?'

Mabuse shrugged. 'I don't know. Not yet. I've been here six weeks, since the old queen died. It is standard practice for the ordos to send a representative to investigate the death of any significant Imperial potentate, and Queen Gartrude, may the Emperor gather her to himself, was certainly that.'

'Foul play?'

'Oh, most certainly. She was murdered. But in such an exquisitely subtle way, it looked like the action of old age.'

'Murdered?'

'Yes. The royal medicae missed the signs, but I am certain.'

'Then it must be reported! It must-'

Mabuse reached out with his golden hand and rested it on Priad's armoured-sleeve. It was a curiously bold yet informal gesture and Priad fell silent at once, out of surprise more than anything else.

'Knowing she was murdered is not the point, brother-sergeant. Knowing why and by whom is the job of the Inquisition.'

'The boy... the new king. He would have most to gain,' said Priad.

Mabuse chuckled. 'You are a greater warrior than I will ever be, brother-sergeant Priad. But you are no detective.'

'I-'

'Hush. King Elect Naldo is not the culprit. Of that, I am assured. I had considered that possibility. No, the regicide is down to someone else. Person or persons as yet unknown. I have suspicions. I may be able to act on them soon. For now, I simply wish to broker peace between us, Priad. Indulge me and keep my mission secret. When the time comes, I may have need of the mighty Iron Snakes.'



THAT NIGHT, once the duties in the great hall were done, Damocles went without rest. In the lamp-lit gloom of the apartments provided for them, they waited and loitered, wargear loosened or partially stripped off. Some talked into the night. Others ate and drank from the rich fares provided, just for the novelty. Xander hand-wrestled with Aekon and Andromak. Old Pindor played a game of regicide with Scyllon.

Priad watched them move the pieces across the inlaid board. How inappropriate, he thought to himself.

He opened a glazed brass hatch and let himself out onto the balcony that terraced their apartment level. The night was warm, with the scents of dune-orchids and exhaust-fumes on the dry desert air. Straits of silvery cloud barred the moon and shone against a sky as dark and purple as fresh heart muscle. Lit by a soft amber radiance, the city lurked beneath him. Dots of light, the running lamps of air traffic, muddled along the canyons of streets below. Occasionally, a higher altitude transport hummed past, soaring between the gilded spires.

Priad rested his bare hands on the balcony rail and looked down. The lights of the traffic made a long glittering river, like a kraretyer, a giant bull-wyrm, rising to bask.

'Brother?' It was Khiron. The noble Apothecary had teased out his mane of grey hair so it fell around his wide shoulders.

'Khiron. We must be on our guard for trouble.'

'I knew there was something on your mind. What kind of trouble?'

'We'll know it when it comes.'

There was a low rumble. Priad wondered if Khiron had growled something. Then a distant flash and another grumble.

Thunder.

Priad heard a tapping sound.

Rain, heavy drops of it, was beginning to fall.



THERE WOULD BE, Seraskier Duxl explained, four days of celebration.

Four daily rituals and observances leading to the full coronation. Damocles

would walk in the van of the great procession on each of those days as the rites were performed. On the first day, the king elect would march to the Imperial Basilica at the head of an entourage of ten thousand worshippers and there his suitability would be judged using the ancient treasures of Iorgu. Ten million citizens would line the streets and praise him.

Priad asked about the rain. Unusual, the Seraskier admitted. The rains only came once every few decades. But a good portent, nevertheless.

The uproar of the procession was worse than any battle. Horns and trumpets blared and cymbals clashed. The millions cheered and strewed their way with palm fronds cut fresh from the doum trees. Glittering regiments of Imperial Guard and PDF flowed down the main boulevards of the city, escorting nobles in lift-litters and speeder limousines, columns of tracked war-machines, bands of painted dancers, and packs of glabrous sand-sloth, swinging their massive heads and barking as their jockeys cropped and goaded their wrinkled flanks.

During the long and tedious ceremony at the Basilica, thunder rolled again, and a fume of aurora lights flushed the darkening sky. The citizenry moaned and howled in awe at this great sign. By the time Bishop Osokomo got to the verses where the treasures were to be brought forth, rain was hammering on the roof-dome and streaming like molten glass down the multi-coloured windows. The stained light in the Basilica shifted and danced.

The treasures were unimpressive. A crown, an orb, a sceptre, a torc, ancient things that were only brought out for coronations. They were the heirloom legacies of the first monarchs of Iorgu, preserved for all time in the Sacred Mound where the founding colony had built its original fastness.

Apparently, they possessed arcane power, and would react in supernatural rebuke if presented to a ruler elect who was not fit. The treasures did not stir on their silk cushions as they were waved under Naldo's face.

He was, so it seemed, fit to rule.

The crowd cheered, drowning out the thunderstorm. The cavalcade withdrew to the Palace. The next day, they would process to the Astropathicae for the subsequent round of mumbling rituals.

THE STORM DID not let up. Rain pelted into the evening, and more flamboyant auroras marked the heavens. Tense and unnerved, Priad withdrew Damocles to their apartments.

At midnight, an aide from the staff of Lord Militant Farnsey came to them and requested private interview with Priad.

'My lord wishes it known that there is some alarm in the visiting dignitaries,' said the aide.

'I see,' said Priad.

'The weather, the lights in the sky... they seem to be more than portents. Omens, perhaps.'

Priad shrugged.

'Great war-brother,' the aide said uncomfortably, 'there is disquiet in the city. In the low quarters there has been some rioting. Also, reports of apparitions and visions stalking the streets. Murmurs in the warp, unsettling the Guild Astropathicae. Unrest is growing.'

'I have noticed as much,' Priad said.

'It is feared the forces of fate do not wish this coronation accomplished,' said the aide. 'If it continues – if it grows – the lord militant and all the off-world guests will be forced to withdraw from Iorgu. My lord trusts that the acclaimed Iron Snakes will escort them to safety, if that becomes an issue.'

'I serve the Emperor and his vassals,' Priad said, remembering his Chapter Master's instructions.

'Good,' said the aide. 'The lord militant will be delighted to know that.'



BY DAWN, it was very much worse. Panic-induced riots had scoured through the city's suburbs in the night, despite the brutal response of the arbites, leaving several wards in flames, smashed and unpoliced. The vast crowds now filling the avenues and boulevards of the central quarter had become protesters, not worshippers. They chanted for help, and for release from the curse that had fallen on Iorgu, even as the Arbites' riot-trucks hosed them off the streets with their water cannons. Lightning had struck the steeple of the Astropathica, killing forty-two adepts

and injuring scores of others. Unextinguishable corposant flickered and burned around the pylon tops of eighteen city towers. It was said the silk-makers' quarter had been entirely abandoned after a terrible phantom had been glimpsed roaming there.

On Priad's behest, Kules had made contact with their orbiting battle-barge. The transmitted picts he had received in answer were troubling. Six satellite towns around Iorgu City showed signs of rioting and civil unrest. Whole stretches of desert had bloomed with unseasonal foliage and bright flowers, turning the pink landscape green and white for thousands of hectares.

The deluge had washed fresh, shallow tides into the basins of the old dry seas.



LORD MILITANT Farnsey didn't send an aide this time. Surprisingly, he came in person.

'Rioters and common filth snap around the palace and rise in numbers. We are departing the planet.'

'We, lord?' asked Priad.

'The nobility, sergeant. The worthy guests. Augurs say that Iorgu is about to fall in fire and damnation. We must not be here when that happens.'

'Indeed not,' Priad replied. He stood at the head of Damocles facing the lord militant and his gaggle of assistants and bodyguards. All of Damocles were now in full wargear, battle-ready. Only Priad had his head exposed, his helm under the crook of his arm.

'I trust then you will escort us to the landing field and see us off planet.'

'The Imperial Guard...'

'Is occupied supporting the local Arbites in putting down the riot. They have their hands full.'

'You'd leave them here?' Priad said.

Farnsey glared at him. 'Get some notion of priority, brother-sergeant. They are dog-soldiers and fighting is what they do. We are nobility and we will be afforded every respect. See to your duty and get us out of this hell-hole.'

'Of course,' said Priad, turning to his squad and preparing to issue them with instructions.

A tiny, gleaming missile flew into the apartment, low enough over the heads of the lord militant and his entourage to make them duck in consternation. It came to a halt and hovered in front of Priad.

It was a perfect human index finger, machined in gold.

A soft-focused hologram, tiny enough to cup in the palm of one hand, materialised in the air above it. An image of a man in a black robe.

'Brother-Sergeant Priad. The hour is nigh,' crackled the voice of Mabuse through miniature vox-relay speakers. 'I trust I may call on you and Damocles. I have found the why and the who.'

'Can you proceed without us?' Priad asked quietly.

'Yes, brother. But without you, I will not succeed, and Iorgu will perish.'

'Are you exaggerating for effect, Mabuse?'

'No,' replied the little hologram. 'I am underestimating.'

'Damocles stands ready.'

'Follow where I point and find me,' said the hologram as it dissolved. The golden digit swung around in the air and waited impatiently.

'Damocles! Arm up and set for combat! Follow me!'

There was a loud clatter of readying weapons.

'What are you doing? Where are you going?' Farnsey bellowed as Priad led the squad out of the apartment past him.

'I have a real duty to perform, my lord,' Priad snapped.

'You'd leave us to the mob? How dare you, Astartes? I am a lord militant! You will conduct me to the landing field in safety!'

Priad turned back for a moment. 'I suggest you dig in and lie low, my lord. Damocles cannot assist you at this time.'

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' raged Farnsey.

'Getting some notion of priority, lord,' said Priad.

Farnsey's curses followed them down the hallway. He would report them, discredit their name with the Chapter Master, ruin them and ruin their reputations.

The threats bounced off Priad's armour as harmlessly as raindrops.



THE GUIDING digit led them down through the sprawling bulk of the Royal Palace. Some rooms and hallways lay deserted, some showed signs of ransack. In the corridors, they passed servants and aides who had pilfered what they could take and were busy getting clear, or the halted baggage trains of departing nobles, stewards calling out for servitors that were unlikely to respond. One one colonnade walk, PDF troopers were fighting a losing battle to secure shutters across window spaces blown in by the storm. Lightning splintered the darkness outside, and rain drenched in through the opening. They passed a hall where hundreds of palace inhabitants were kneeling in terror as agitated hierarchs led them in desperate prayers for deliverance.

The spinal elevators were choked and occupied, so they made their way to a service lift in the western side of the palace spire and commandeered it. The palace staff waiting to use it fled the moment the great Astartes appeared.

The service lift deposited them in a deep-set garage bay of slimy rockcrete. The wall-set lights flickered as the main power source fluctuated.

'Secure transport,' the little holoform of Mabuse said.

Most vehicles had gone. Laden, overcrowded speeders were queuing up the exit ramp. The majority of the remaining vehicles were too small to take the whole squad.

'Here!' cried Scyllon, reading off his auspex. In a private side bay sat several of the lift-litters and repulsor barges used in the coronation procession. Amongst them was a long-hulled land-yacht of luxury-build. Liveried servants were struggling to load travel caskets and baggage aboard it.

'Vacate the vehicle!' Priad barked on speaker. Some of the servants ran, dropping the luggage they were handling. Others froze and gazed at the approaching Space Marines in blank dismay. Pindor and Natus

shoved them out of the way and boarded the yacht.

'Powered up and set to go!' Pindor voxed back after a moment.

Priad gestured Dyognes and Xander forward to throw off the baggage already stowed.

'What the devil do you think you're doing?' wailed a voice.

Priad turned. The Princess Royal of Cartomax, clad in a floor-length fur, her face pale, was rushing towards them, flanked by half a dozen less-than-eager bodyguards.

'That's my vehicle!' she declared, glaring up at the brother-sergeant. She barely came up to his elbow. Priad was amazed at her brazen outrage. She seemed to have no fear of the towering warriors. Or maybe, he considered, her fear of the situation outweighed her fear of the Astartes.

'We need it,' Priad said simply.

'Damn you!' she cried. 'It's mine! Mine!'

'Lady, please...' one of the bodyguards whimpered, keeping his eyes fixed on Priad and his men and his hands very obviously away from his own sidearm. 'Please... they are Astartes...'

The princess slapped the man so hard he fell over.

'You will not take my transport,' she told Priad.

'I have already taken it. Calm yourself and return to the palace compound.'

'You will escort me to safety then! You serve me!'

Ah, now, that was it, Priad realised. She wasn't afraid of them, because she didn't understand them. Raised in the rarefied atmosphere of a high court, she had been educated to think of the Astartes as servant-warriors. Servants of the Imperium. She was royal-born, so undoubtedly they had to serve her.

Such marvellous arrogance.

'Go away. Now,' he said.

'Do you know who I-' she began to say.

'Go away *now*,' Priad repeated.

She gave an indignant shriek and shot him. Point blank, with a micro-laser from under her furs. The blast scorched his chest plate and flashed warning sigils across his visor-scope. Scyllon and Aekon had their bolters aimed at her in a heartbeat.

She gasped and back off a pace, incredulous.

'Go away,' he repeated as calmly as he could manage, trying to ignore the urgings of the target cross that filled his view and framed her face.

'Lady,' a voice boomed. The golden digit now hovered between Priad and the Princess. Mabuse had boosted the volume of its vox speakers. 'I advise you to run away now. Right now. Do as the brother-sergeant instructs you.' The little holoform glared at her.

'Why? Why?' she choked.

The holoform of Mabuse shivered and dissolved. It was replaced by the hard-light of a crest-insignia. The rosette emblem of the Inquisition.

'That's why.'

She ran, wailing.

A salutary lesson, Priad thought. Even someone haughty and thick-skinned enough to be unafraid of the Astartes hides in terror from the Inquisition.



PINDOR RAN THE yacht out of the garage bay into the streets. Xander and Dyognes had been forced to walk in front of it to clear the jumble of speeders from the ramp. Once they were through, the two warriors reboarded, and the yacht sped clear down the boulevard.

Monsoon rain was falling in swirling curtains. Weird electrical effects underlit the low, sinister sky and Priad saw at least five city towers struck by lightning in as many minutes.

The road was littered with the detritus of rioting, and overturned vehicles burned in the rain. Dim figures flashed by in the shadows, fleeing down the pavements and walkways. At one junction, the bodies of nine arbitrators lay broken on the roadway. Priad's sensors detected sporadic gunfire from neighbouring streets.

For one fifty metre section, the streetlevel windows of a tower showed not their passing reflection but a clamour of open-mouthed ghosts, screaming at them from the rain-streamed glass.

'Golden Throne!' cried Andromak. 'Did you see that?'

'No,' Priad lied.

The yacht swooped east, along the main city highway, up and over a hump-backed bridgeway that ran across a stately park. The doom trees in the park were on fire, but the leaves weren't burning.

'Turn east,' Mabuse voxed. 'Head for the Sacred Mound.'

Pindor struggled with the yacht's controls. They were unfamiliar and his massive, gauntleted hands were honestly too big to manage the dainty, knurled levers and throttles. He tried to steer the yacht onto the wide avenue that rose through the mid-town towards the area of the Mound, and ran them a glancing blow along a section of crash barrier. The impact showered sparks into the air and left a ugly weal down the side of the luxury transport's hull.

In quick succession, three lightning strikes brutally stung the roadway nearby, one to the front, the other two to the left. They left scorched blast holes smoking in the rockcrete. The electro-magnetic pulses left them dazed and blind for a second, and the golden digit fell to the deck, dead and inert. A second later and it rose drunkenly back into the air, the holoform reigniting.

'Come on!' Mabuse voxed.

'Dear God-Emperor...' Pindor mumbled.

Priad looked out. A human skeleton, its bones made of polished ebony and its socket-eyes glowing with a ghastly yellow radiance stood on the roadway ahead of them. It was forty metres tall.

Damocles threw open the top hatches and started to blaze at the monstrous thing with their bolters, white tracers ripping the wet air. Andromak fired an incandescent blue blast from his plasma gun.

Undamaged, unflinching, the skeleton thing took a step forward.

'Stop wasting ammunition!' Mabuse all but screamed, his voice tinny and shrill. 'Go through it! It's just a glamour... an apparition!'

'Do it!' Priad ordered.

Pindor threw the throttle lever to full ahead and drove the yacht at the nightmare's black, tree-trunk tibia. They all braced for impact.

None came. They were clear and gone, heading up the avenue. The gigantic phantom had vanished into the storm.



THE SACRED MOUND was massive, its apex crackling with corposant. Damocles abandoned the yacht at the base apron and advanced at double-time up through the lashing rain onto the old stone causeway that crossed the perimeter ditch to the main entrance.

Mabuse was waiting for them under the lintel of the wide doorway. He held a las-pistol in his real hand, and the fused unrecognisable remains of several corpses sprawled on the flagstones around him.

Mabuse raised his golden hand and the roaming digit flew up and snapped back into place.

'Come on,' he said, turning to move into the Mound. Priad saw he carried what seemed to be a heavy knapsack on his back.

'Would you care to tell me what's going on?' Priad asked.

'There isn't really time,' Mabuse replied curtly.

'Those bodies... who did you kill?'

'I mean it, brother-sergeant... there isn't really time.'

As if to underscore his words, a salvo of autogun fire whipped down the entrance tunnel from within, the large calibre shells ricocheting off the stone floor and low roof. Natus cursed as several rounds struck his armour.

Priad ran into the gunfire, his bolter juddering in his fists. On his visor, the ammo tally dropped. The target cross jumped and flickered as it searched the green gloom for a body.

A flash of muzzle discharge, hot-white against the emerald background.

The cross locked.

Priad fired and a human figure tumbled out of cover with such force it bounced off the wall behind it.

To his side, Khiron and Xander cut down two more ambushers.

In seamless formation, Damocles swept into the inner atrium. Natus and Aekon covered the back, Xander and Scyllon the exit ahead. Pindor and Andromak advanced into the centre of the hall.

Priad knelt to examine one of the bodies.

A human male, a local. Nothing especially significant about him apart from the fact that thirty seconds before he had been brave or foolhardy enough to open fire on a squad of Space Marines. Priad's bolter fire had all but turned him inside out.

'A looter?' he asked.

Mabuse leaned over Priad's shoulder and reached out with his golden hand. The ring finger projected a thin, searing fusion beam almost a metre long that grotesquely peeled the corpse's flesh away from his forehead. Priad shuddered as he saw the rune branded into the front of the skull.

'Cultist,' Mabuse said, switching off the fusion beam. 'The inner brand, the bone-burn. In all my years of hunting these devils, I've never found out how they do that. How they brand the mark into the bone without blemishing the skin over it.'

'I've never seen its like,' Priad admitted.

'It's the mark of a powerful and ancient cult,' said Mabuse matter-of-factly. 'I've terminated their activities on three other worlds. I was dismayed to find them at work here.'

'And how did you find that out?' Khiron asked.

Mabuse turned to the apothecary and smiled.

'Don't tell me... there isn't really time.'

'Indeed,' nodded Mabuse. 'Besides, there are some things you don't need to know. To keep it simple, a notorious and well-backed cult is active here on Iorgu. They carried out the murder of the old queen for one simple reason. They wanted a coronation.'

'What?' Priad snapped. 'Why?'

'Because only during a coronation would the stasis locks of the Sacred Mound be disengaged and the heirloom treasures of Iorgu removed for the ceremonies.'

'They're after the treasures?'

'No. They're after what lies under the Mound. What the treasures hold in check.'

Priad rose. 'If there's anything that makes me want to crush a man's head, it's riddles, Mabuse.'

'The first settlers of Iorgu, the first monarchs, bested something here. Something they encountered when they first landed. The truth of it is lost in the veils of time, and only appears to us through the world myths. Some great evil was here... had been here since before the rise of man. The Iorguan firstcomers vanquished it and built this mound over it. The treasures are the components of a stasis system that keeps it dormant.'

'It?'

Mabuse shrugged. 'What's the worst thing you can think of, brother-sergeant?'

Priad didn't answer.

'Worse than that,' Mabuse said. 'It's locked away, slumbering, and so it's safe enough to remove the treasures for a few days each time there's a coronation. But this coronation has been forced, and the moment the hierarchs removed the treasures, the cult made its way into the unprotected Mound to stage the rituals of awakening.'

'What do we do?' asked Priad.

Mabuse opened his knapsack so Priad could see inside. The sceptre and orb and all the other precious treasures were tumbled together inside.

'We put the relics back and reengage the stasis system. Before it's too late.'



THE INNER burrows of the Mound were cased in stone; floor, walls and roof. From the atrium, they spiralled down into the belly of the hill, lit by fluttering light reeds and caged glow globes. At regular intervals, other down-spiralling tunnels spoked away from the main run. Mabuse led Damocles down in the half-light, often taking choices at junction spurs that to the brother-sergeant seemed to defy logic.

'Trust me,' Mabuse said. 'The inner structure of the Mound is built like a triple helix, and is full of dead ends and liar-paths.'

'Liar-paths?'

'Artful diversions designed by the Mound-builders. Fake tunnels and curves meant to outwit tomb-robbers.'

They're outwitting me, Priad thought.

Reality had become unkempt in the lower levels. In one section of slowly sloping tunnel-curve, it was raining and lighting flashed. In another, the walls bellied and swayed like the wall of a tidal wave. In a third, every wall-stone became a chattering human skull. None of the skulls had eye sockets. The bone bowls were smooth down to the snapping teeth.

Mabuse seemed oblivious to it all.

Around another wide bend however, he faltered and paused.

'I've made an error,' he told them. 'Go back. We should have taken the left-hand turn.'

They retraced their steps back to the last junction.

'No,' he decided suddenly. 'I was right. It's trying to fool me. You're trying to fool me, aren't you?' He yelled the last phrase at the walls, which rippled and sweated.

They went back the way they had come. Fleshless rat-dogs the size of small horses blocked their way, eyes like yellow coals, exposed muscles and organs glistening in the light. Aekon cried out in surprise and fired his bolter.

'Glamours!' Mabuse said. 'Just walk through them.'

Following the inquisitor's lead, Damocles waded through the semi-corporeal beasts, feeling them leave a sticky trace of ectoplasm on their armoured legs. As they touched them, the skinned things dissipated into steam.

'They're just ghosts,' Mabuse assured the Iron Snakes. 'Phantoms generated by the psychic birth pangs of the Sleeper. All of them, symptomatic phenomena like the storms and the auroras and the corposant.'

What they met around the next bend wasn't glamour at all. Cultists rushed them from the division of another spiral, weapons blazing. Khiron and Pindor took the brunt, reeling back. Aekon, Dyognes and Scyllon met the attack with a broadside of bolter fire that sprayed the tunnel wall with blood and bone shards.

More cultists charged them from the depths. They carried a mixture of las-weapons and autoguns. One had a flamer.

The gout of fire wrapped itself around Priad and his armour sang out an imperilled series of alarms. Priad strode through the flame and laid in with his bolter and his power claw.

Three cultists fell to the spitting gun and two more to the venerable claw-weapon.

Andromak pressed in beside Priad and extinguished three more cultists with his plasma gun.

Other fell back, firing as they went, chased by Priad's punishing fire.

'The inquisitor is down!' Khiron voxed.

Sending Andromak and Kules ahead at point, Priad hurried back to where Khiron and Natus stood over the crumpled body of Mabuse.

He was a mess. At least three auto-rounds had hit him. His pale face was paler than ever as he held out the knapsack to Priad. When he spoke, blood gushed out of his mouth.

'Finish it, brother-sergeant.'

'Stay with him,' Priad told Khiron as he took the knapsack. 'You too, Aekon, Xander.'

'The rest with me.'



THEY PRESSED ON, ignoring the glamours that rose at them, fighting back the cultists that tried to stop them. For thirty-five minutes, they battled down the last stretch of tunnel-curve into the heart-chamber of the mound.

Priad lost count of the cultists they had killed. The tunnel slope was awash with blood.

He could hear a frantic ticking, like the stridulation of insects, getting louder with each passing moment. It sounded like a billion bugs clattering their wing-cases in the darkness.

The heart-chamber was wide and high, a chapel in the bowels of the Mound. They struck in from the left, gunning down a dozen cultists in a rattling blaze of fire. There was a podium and an altar of greasy pink stone. The cultists had laid out the most appalling offerings on the altar.

Sacrifices. Butchery to turn even the strongest stomach.

The fritiniency of chattering bugs increased in volume. Unseen elytra in their double-millions crisped and rubbed against each other. The air was thick and sour, and the environment sustainers in the Astartes' suits began to struggle as they worked harder.

Apparitions of goat skulls fizzled in the air around them. Kules head-shot a cultist that they had presumed dead but was now reaching for his weapon.

The Sleeper was almost awake.

A noxious smoke, the vile stink of aeons, furred out around the altar. Despite his suit-filters, Priad smelled grave-mould and the corrupted rot of deep tombs, locked away from air and light for thousands of years. There was a sickening taste they could sense even in their airtight helmets. A numbing dislocation. A kaleidoscope of nauseating colours.

Priad knew his nose and ears were bleeding. The suit vents jittered as they tried to cope with the liquid welling out of him. He saw Kules and Andromak fall to their knees. Natus and Scyllon started shooting at shadows. Dyognes and Pindor wavered in confusion.

Bugs, stridulating bugs, were crawling all over them. Priad saw their clicking forms scurrying across his visor-view, antennae waving.

He tried to wipe them away. He tried to reach the altar.

The Sleeper began to form in the air of the heart-chamber. Its shape was made up of swirling insects, slowly coalescing into a solid.

Eyes... vast ocelli in compound form... skull cheekbones... slowly swaying palps as long as a man's body. Yellow light began to froth up in the monstrous compound eyes as they resolved.

The swarming insects coated the members of Damocles, forcing them to their knees. Priad saw the tide of insects eating the flesh from the cultists' bones. Living and dead alike, the cultists were consumed.

The glowing yellow ocelli stared at him as they became more real. The monstrous palp mouthparts reached for him.

Priad fired a bolter round into the Sleeper's gummy, salivating maw for good measure and reached the altar. He had to wipe blood and entrails away to find the age-smoothed recesses designed for the relics.

Swarming carnivorous bugs weighed his limbs down and spilled in fat squirming masses into the knapsack as he opened it. He took the treasures of Iorgu out, one by one, and slotted each one back into place.

As he reached the last one, the sceptre, the writhing weight of insects blotted out his visor and swamped his vision. He wiped his visor with his hand.

'Sleep again!' he bellowed through speaker grilles clogged with insect parts and still-wriggling, shorn-off legs. 'Sleep again forever!'



AFTER THE calamity, Iorgu City smoked like a kicked-over bonfire. The storm roiled away into the north and left the sky bleached of all colour except the yellowish sulphur dioxide trailing from the fires.

A great, wounded outrage lingered in the city.

'Message from Lord Militant Farnsey's officio,' said Kules, transferring the vox-squirt to Priad's data-plate.

Priad logged it with the others. Fifteen formal communiqués of denouncement, from Farnsey, the Princess Royal, even the king elect.


'Damn them all,' he said. Damocles had purged and sealed the Mound, but had not yet made a report to anyone yet. Perhaps it was better if the Iorguans remained ignorant of the fate that had almost befallen them.

'They will send petitions to Karybdis,' Khiron said softly.

'Let them,' said Priad. He took the golden digit from his belt pouch and activated it. A tiny holoform of Mabuse appeared. 'Exalted Chapter Master Seydon,' the holoform began. 'With my dying breath, I commend Damocles to you. They will undoubtedly receive rebuke and censure for abandoning their duty of care to the Imperial nobility. However, there are certain facts that must be made known to you—'

Priad snapped the holoform off.

'I don't think we have anything to be ashamed of,' he said.

Far below, the flash of their landing ship reflected off the mud-plains and temporary seas of Iorgu. Bright as a serrated knife from the daylight winking off its ridged bows, the Imperial barge loomed ahead of them like a rising star in the eastern sky. 

THE *TEN TAILED CAT* IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR *RACONTEURS* AND THE TELLERS OF *TALL TALES*...

THEY COME FOR MANY REASONS, SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON *DIRE* WARNINGS.

WHILST OTHERS COME WITH FAR *DARKER* INTENTIONS...

...GREW WORSE DURING OUR *THIRD* WEEK IN THE *MIDDLE MOUNTAINS*...

...WHEN *TROUBLE* BEFELL THE HOLY BROTHERS IN A VARI-

...UH...

OH, PLEASE, FATHER - DON'T LET *ME* STOP YOU.

IT'S NOT A VERY *G-GOOD* STORY ANYWAY...

WELL... IF YOU'RE *SURE*, SIT AND HAVE SOME MORE *ALE*, EH?

PERHAPS I MIGHT TAKE THE FLOOR INSTEAD?

MY NAME'S *RICHT KARNER*.

YOU MIGHT HAVE *HEARD* OF ME.

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

The Witch Hunter's Tale

SCRIPT: SI SPURRIER
ART: CLINT LANGLEY
LETTERING: FIONA STEPHENSON

'IN THE *SLUMS* OF THE CITY, THEY
KNOW ME VERY WELL. *INDEED...*'

H-HUNTERS!
FLEE!

THAT
ONE. TAKE
HIM.

NRRRRGH!

GRAAASH!

VOLTER HAJ,
I PRESUME...

ONE OF YOUR
ASSOCIATES HAPPENED
TO MENTION YOU IN
CONVERSATION...

AFTER
A LITTLE - HA -
PERSUASION, OF
COURSE.

I ONLY
WANT A *NAME*,
HAJ - THAT'S
ALL.

THE NAME
OF THE *CULT*
LEADER.

D-DURING
WHAT YOU
MEAN...

FAIR
ENOUGH.. THE
DUNGEON'S PLEASE,
GENTLEMEN.

'*POOR* PLACES, THE *SLUMS*. RATS,
ROACHES AND *RAGS* A-PLENTY.'

MIND YOU... YOU'D BE
AMAZED AT WHAT
RASS CAN CONCEAL.

SIGMAR'S
BLOOD!

SSSSSS!

SPEAK
NOT THE NAME OF
YOUR PRETTY GOD,
HUMAN

URI? THE
SICKLE.

YESSS!
CUT ME!

I YEARN FOR
PUNISHMENT!
IN THE NAME
OF SLAANESH -
CUT ME!

FIREBRANDS,
FLAILS, THUMBSCREWS -
WHATEVER I TRIED THE
TWISTED THING JUST
HOWLED FOR
MORE.

FORTUNATELY, I'M
GIFTED IN THE ART OF
MEDICINE...

DRINK
THIS, YOU
SCUM.

...UNK
UNK
UNK...

POISON, YES?
WILL IT BURN MY
INSIDES?

WILL
IT HURT?

HOPE IT
HURTSSSS!

'AN HOUR PASSED BEFORE I RETURNED
TO SEE THE LIQUID'S EFFECTS.'

YOU LOOK
~~DISAPPOINTED~~,
VILE THING.

SSSI NO
PAIN

USELESSSS
POISON DIDNT HURT
AT ALL!

MORE
TORTURE NOW,
YESS?

YOU'D
LIKE THAT,
WOULDN'T
YOU?

YESS! YESS!
MORE PAIN FOR
SLAANESH!

CREATURE?
I HAVE SOME *BAD* NEWS
FOR YOU...

IVE ALREADY
STARTED.

HRN?

'THE DISTILLED LIVER
POISONS OF THE THREE
BANDED SWAMP PROACH.

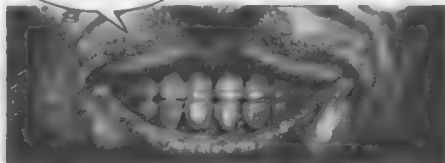
'WHAT BETTER WAY TO TORTURE
A *WARRIOR*, THAN TO *WASH*
THEM ANY PAIN?'

IT NUMBS EVERY
NERVE IN THE BODY.

BUH...
B-BUT...

THE
CREATURE SPILLED
ITS GUTS.

IN EVERY
WAY.



SO WHAT DID YOU
THINK OF MY STORY,
FATHER?

NOT TOO
GRIM FOR A MAN
AS WELL TRAVELLED
AS YOURSELF, I
TRUST?

NN...
CUH... CAN'T
MOVE...

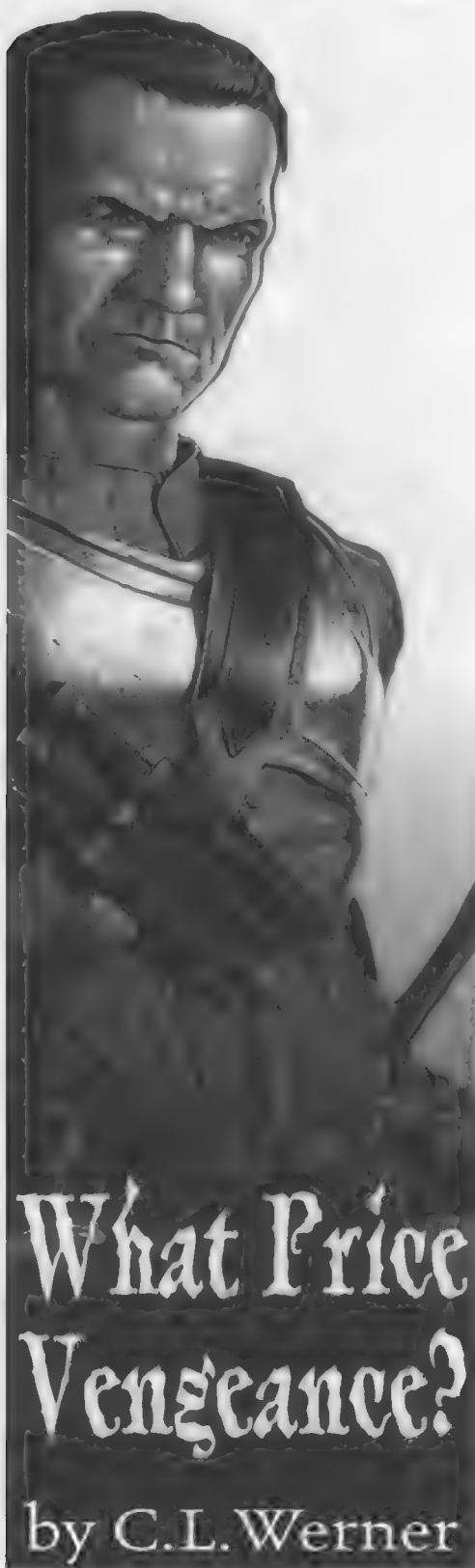
SOMETHING
WRONG, FATHER?

I DO HOPE
THERE'S NOT SOMETHING
BAD IN YOUR
ALE...

FUNNY THING,
NOW I COME TO
THINK OF IT...

YOU'LL
NEVER GUESS WHO
HAJ SAID WAS LEADING
HIS VILE LITTLE
CULT...

THE END



What Price Vengeance?

by C.L. Werner

THE RAGGED group of riders slowly made their way through the craggy grey piles of jagged stone. The men wore dirty, unkempt clothes, their armour soiled by grime and fresh blood. Mud caked the legs of their steeds. The horses themselves moved slowly, their tired limbs rising and falling with an almost machine-like cadence. The animals were too tired even to protest the continuing march. Their masters, too, sagged in their saddles, fatigue wracking their bodies. They were no less spent than their animals, but, unlike the horses, a greater need urged them forward. In each of the bleary eyes that stared from the riders' haggard faces there burned an ember, a tiny coal that kept their weather-beaten bodies in the saddle.

The line of riders manoeuvred past an old, half-dead tree, its skeletal limbs pawing at the dark, rain-laden sky. Soon, the clouds would again unleash the storm. The riders hoped to achieve their destination before the rain came upon them once more, but rain, or no, they would take no shelter save that offered by the castle of Claudan de Chegney, son of the Viscount Augustine de Chegney.

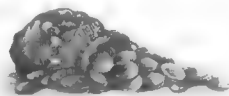
The men rode around the dead tree, their horses barely protesting the abrupt change in the tedium. The next to last horseman paused as he jerked his steed's head about with the reins. He paused, then fell, his body crashing into the mud beneath him. The man lifted his arm, reaching toward the stirrup of his saddle, his hand trembling from cold and fatigue. He pulled on the stirrup for a moment, then his hand dropped back into the mud and he was still. From a rent in his brigandine, dark crimson seeped into the mud.

"There goes Tonino," the rider in line behind the fallen man reported, his voice expressionless. He was a swarthy man, his moustached face split along one side by the grey slash of an old scar. The riders ahead of him turned in their saddles, tired eyes staring at the comrade who lay bleeding in the mud.

The man at the head of the column nodded his head grimly. It was encased in a dark steel helmet, plated chin guards framing the man's sharp features. The leader of the riders sighed, sagging a little more in the saddle as he made the sound. One hand released the reins to make the sign of the goddess Myrmidia in the air. Then, the leader turned

about once more. After a moment, his men followed suit. Soon, the entire column of twenty had marched on, leaving the body in the mud, the horse to go where it would.

'We shall just add Tonino to what is owed us,' the leader of the riders declared, his voice low, harsh, and murderous. The tiny ember of vengeance burned a little more brightly in his eyes.



GOURMAND, steward to the Comte de Chegney, stared from the window of the watchtower that loomed above the gate of the foreboding castle that had once been home to the deposed House of von Drakenburg. For centuries, the barons von Drakenburg had guarded the pass through the Grey Mountains, protecting Imperial interests from the ambitions of their Bretonnian neighbours. But such was in the past. For five years now, the lord of the Schloss Drakenburg owed fealty not to the Emperor in Altdorf, but the king in Couronne. Or more precisely, the viscount in the Chateau de Chegney.

Gourmand leaned a little forward from the window, looking over at the armoured man-at-arms by his side. He pointed with a knobby hand at a number of riders slowly making their way down the slope of the pass through the mountains.

'Bandits?' the soldier remarked, straining to make out more than the general outline of the men and their steeds.

'Keep a watch on them,' he said, clapping the soldier's mailed shoulder. 'They appear to be heading towards the castle. I will inform the comte and see what he wishes to do.'

When Gourmand returned to the West Tower with his master, a young, dark-haired man who sported the rakishly short beard and moustache currently favoured in the great courts of Bretonnia, the riders had drawn much nearer indeed. Even the steward's tired old eyes could make out the battered armour and bloodstained clothes, the mud-caked tack and harness, the wearily plodding steeds and swarthy skinned men.

'Bandits, my lord,' stated the sentry Gourmand had charged to keep an eye on the approaching riders.

'Bandits thinking to storm a castle in the middle of a storm?' the Comte de Chegney shook his head. 'Mercenaries more likely.' As he made the observation, the nobleman peered still harder at the approaching men.

'Whoever they are, they've seen some swordplay,' said Gourmand, still covering the riders with a suspicious gaze. 'Recently too. A few of them look as though their wounds are still fresh. Perhaps they are some free-company that thought to raid villages and found the knights of Bretonnia more than they counted upon.'

'By the Lady, I think I recognise them,' the comte declared. 'When last I was at my father's house, he was engaging a band of Tileans. That man below I seem to remember as being their leader.' Claudan de Chegney waved at the men below. The leading rider, a man in a tight-fitting steel helm, returned his greeting.

'Call the archers off,' Claudan told his steward. 'I'd not turn away any man in such a state with the Grey Mountains in such an ill humour. That these men are of my father's house makes it doubly my duty to shelter them.'

'Your father would not think so,' grumbled Gourmand, still regarding the riders dubiously.

'I am not my father,' the Comte de Chegney snapped, a brief flash of fire in his eyes.



The Comte de Chegney was below in the courtyard when the gates opened and the motley group of haggard horsemen entered the Schloss Drakenburg. Two men-at-arms flanked him, each in the de Chegney livery and by Gourmand. A scabbard and sword had been donned by the comte, but he wore no armour, the blade at his side more a facet of tradition and decorum than any foreboding of danger on his part. These men had already been in a battle, they were tired, and seemingly wounded to the man. Even were they not loyal to his father, men such as these could hardly pose any manner of threat in their condition.

'Hail and well met,' the leader of the troop called out to the Bretonnian noble, his words deeply accented as he translated the Tilean

greeting into the softer tones of Bretonnia.

'I welcome you to the Schloss de Chegney,' Claudan said, though even he still thought of the castle as Schloss Drakenburg. 'You may rest here, and shelter within my walls until the foul mood of the Grey Mountains has passed.'

The leader of the horsemen smiled at the Comte de Chegney's words. 'Well, that is indeed kind of you, my lord. We were seeking cover from the rain when we sighted your castle. I hope that our presumption is forgiven.' The man's tones were the well-tutored semi-servile voice favoured by the mercenaries of Tilea, accustomed to deferring to the mad whims of the ruling merchant princes, while inwardly sneering at the idiocy of these same employers.

'How came you to be abroad with a storm in the air?' interrupted Gourmand. He stared past the leader's sharp features, casting his gaze across the entire company. He noted the blood-caked weapons and armour, the tightly bound injuries. 'And how came you to be in such a condition? Set upon by orcs, perhaps?' It was bait; anyone familiar with the region knew that there had been no orcs in this part of the Grey Mountains since the death of the Great Enchanter many long years past.

'Your castle seems a bit shabby,' the helmeted Tilean commented, ignoring Gourmand's words. 'Not like your father's.'

'I asked what happened to you,' the steward repeated, stepping forward. A glower from the massive Tilean beside the leader made the elderly servant retreat past the closest man-at-arms. The brute favoured the servant with a gap-toothed grimace.

'That's the problem with wealth and position,' the leader continued. 'Someone always has a little more than you do.'

'My steward asked you a question,' the Comte de Chegney said, his voice flat. Now he too was becoming aware of the aura of menace about these men. He had almost forgotten that trickery and treachery had claimed the lord of this castle once before. Now they would do so again.

'Still,' the leader sneered, 'that is the only problem with wealth and position.'

The comte's eyes were locked on the right hand of the Tilean mercenary, waiting for the villain to reach for his sword. Even as the Bretonnian drew his own blade, his eyes were still focused upon the right hand of his chosen foe. Claudan de Chegney never saw

the blade that whipped downwards to slash his throat. He would have understood the means of his death even less, the cunning Tilean device secreted in the sleeve of the mercenary captain, a coil of steel clenched between metal braces, triggered by pressure on a button-like contrivance to shoot a long-bladed dagger from the sleeve of the man's tunic into the grip of his hand.

As the Comte de Chegney fell, the other mercenaries sprang into action. A crossbow bolt from a weapon that had already been armed before entering the castle and was now aimed with terrible speed and accuracy skewered the throat of the man-at-arms to the left of the dying count. The other soldier was trampled by the powerful warhorse of the brutish hairy Tilean that had seconded the leader even as the Bretonnian raised his pike to ward off the sudden and vicious charge. The hairy Tilean roared like a blood-mad bear as he brought his heavy cavalry mace crashing downwards at the cringing, horrified steward. The old man raised his arm to ward away the blow. The steel weapon snapped the man's arm, but did no more than graze the old man's head. Gourmand fell, groaning. On the verge of unconsciousness, he could do no more than roll away from the hooves of the horsemen as they charged up the steps that led from the courtyard into the castle itself.

'Inside, everybody!' the leader shouted. 'Don't give their archers a clean shot!' As if to punctuate the mercenary's words, an arrow flew from the window of a tower to strike one of the rearmost riders in the back. The man fell with a garbled scream. More arrows flew downwards, striking the stone steps and walls as the Tileans charged into the safety of the keep itself.

Ursio looked at his men. Eighteen, there were only eighteen of them now. He had started with fifty-four when he had been engaged by the Viscount de Chegney. Six had fallen when they had seen to the capture of the viscount's neighbour the Marquis le Gaires' annual tithe of gold to His Majesty King Louen Leoncoeur. The others had died when the viscount's own men had ambushed the Tileans, seeking to silence these pawns of their master. Ursio vowed that his treacherous former employer would pay for every man he had lost.

'Spread out!' Ursio roared. 'Search every room! Every hall!' There was a strangled cry and a man-at-arms who had been storming down the stairs toppled down the remainder of the flight, a black bolt of steel and wood protruding from his chest. 'We find the boy, we get paid! The mercenaries roared their approval of their captain's words, many of them tearing away the bandages they had tied about their bodies, for few in the company were as injured as they appeared. The smell of vengeance and the promise of gold lent their fatigued bodies a new vigour. As if sharing in the vitality of their riders, the horses offered no protest as the mercenaries spurred their steeds down hallways and up stairs.

Betraying us, thought Ursio, is going to cost you dearly, viscount.



IN THE NURSERY, Mirella de Chegney and her son's nurse cowered together.

They could hear the sounds of battle and bloodshed echoing throughout the castle all around them. A brave woman in her own right, a part of Mirella desperately wished to race from the protection the as-yet undisturbed nursery to see what had befallen her husband. But a newer and greater concern ruled her thoughts and enthroned a new fear in her heart. A fear for the small, fragile little life she clutched against her body, trying to stifle its crying wail in her bosom.

Suddenly, the door burst inward. A massive brown stallion, flanks caked in mud and dried blood, froth dribbling from its mouth, smashed through the heavy Drakwald timber. The steed whickered in a mixture of protest and pain as the rider upon his back straightened. The man was no less horrid in appearance than his warhorse. A powerful, brutish looking man, his face encased in a mangy black beard, his head sporting a mane of black hair as caked in blood and mud as the flanks of his steed. The man cast blazing brown eyes at the cowering women. With a snarl that was only half laughter, the man dropped from his saddle, shuffling towards the women with an almost hound-like lope.

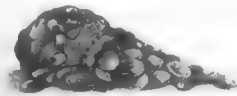
'The boy,' he grunted, his words as thick and heavy as his voice. The man's huge hands closed about the tiny crying shape pressed against Mirella's body. The Tilean began to pull the baby from its mother, his bestial strength overcoming the noblewoman's desperate hold. The Tilean stared at his prize with hungry eyes, jostling the wailing infant in his hands as if to hear the clinking of golden coins.

'Unhand my son, scum!' Mirella screamed. The Tilean turned his burning eyes at the woman. He saw the bright flash of metal in the firelight as Mirella drove a knitting needle into the soft flesh of his groin. The improvised weapon was deflected by the metal of the mercenary's codpiece, but stabbed into the tender flesh of his thigh with scarcely impeded force. With the reflexes of a professional soldier, the Tilean ignored the pain and smashed a meaty fist into the blonde woman's face. Mirella staggered away as the mercenary ripped the needle from his thigh, ignoring the wailing child he had dropped to the fur-laden floor.

'You dropped this,' the Tilean spat as he rushed the reeling Mirella. The woman's hands left her broken nose as the Tilean drove the knitting needle into her midsection. The butcher wasted no further thought on the dying noblewoman, but turned his attention back toward the wailing baby. He saw the nurse clutching the crying child, trying to soothe its pain and terror, while casting horrified eyes on the Tilean's advancing bulk.

'Thinking of killing them too, Verdo?' a cold voice rasped from the doorway. The Tilean looked over to see his captain framed in the entrance of the nursery. 'We need the child, and unless you think you can nurse a baby, we need the girl too.'

'I can wait,' Verdo growled, snatching a fistful of the nurse's hair and pulling her to her feet.



GOURMAND groaned as another sharp pain rasped against his flesh.

'Don't die on me,' a voice snarled. Gourmand recognised those cold tones, that mocking sneer. It was the leader of the mercenaries, the man who had killed his master. The stricken steward groaned and

forced his eyes to settle upon Ursio. The man scowled down at him.

'I have a message for you to deliver, messenger boy,' the mercenary captain tossed a leather packet down, letting it settle on the wounded man's body. 'You take that to the Viscount de Chegney. You tell him what happened here. You also tell him that we have his grandson.' Ursio gestured to the courtyard, once again filled with Tileans, and now joined by the mounted figure of the nursemaid and the swaddled form she held in her arms. 'If he doesn't want his line to die out with him, he will follow those instructions to the letter. Now on your way, messenger boy. And don't die until you deliver that to the viscount.' Ursio's face twisted into a cold, murderous leer.

'For the boy's sake.'



THE CENTURIES hung heavy within the great hall of the Chateau de Chegney. For a thousand years the de Chegney family had dwelled in the massive brooding stone fortress, guarding the narrow pass through the Grey Mountains that linked the Kingdom of Bretonnia with the sprawling Empire. The lands ruled by the viscounts de Chegney had alternately prospered or suffered under their lords, accepting the justice and tyranny alike with the dogged stoicism and subservience of the Bretonnian peasant, but seldom had they bowed their heads in fealty to so terrible a man as he who now sat brooding within the castle's great hall.

The Viscount Augustine de Chegney was no longer a young man, yet his build bespoke an animalistic strength and vitality. The man was not tall; indeed his stature was somewhat squat, slightly below that of the average Bretonnian. But the viscount's shoulders were broad, his head rising from those shoulders on a thick bull's neck. The head perched atop that neck was likewise massive, the viscount's forehead sloping immediately from his thick brows to join his steel-grey hair, cut in the bowl shaped fashion of the Bretonnians. The man's nose was broad, his mouth a thin gash above his scarce chin. The viscount lounged in his high-backed chair wearing a tunic of scarlet trimmed with the fur of a wild cat, a

bejewelled dagger thrust through the leather band of his belt. The viscount's leggings were tucked into a set of high leather boots, their toes shod in steel and silver. A trim of wolf-skin had been sewn to the mouth of the boots, the grey fur exactly matching the cold eyes of the viscount's face.

It was the eyes of Viscount Augustine de Chegney that unnerved those who met them. Like the wild cat and the wolf, there was a ferocious cunning and ruthlessness about them, a quality of vicious determination that offered no quarter to those who might stand between the man and his desires. Even the closest of the viscount's associates dreaded the steely gaze of their master, more so when the fire of emotion crept into them and glared from behind the icy grey pools to strike with the force of a basilisk's stare.

Elodore Pleasant was facing such eyes at this moment, nervously adjusting his weight from one foot to the other. Pleasant was Augustine de Chegney's oldest and closest crony, and had become his master's seneschal following the sudden and unexpected death of the Augustine's father. A slender, haggard-looking man, Pleasant's head was bald, a thin mane of unkempt white hair fringing the back of his head. The merest suggestion of a moustache struggled in the shadow of Pleasant's sharp, bird-like nose. The man wore a long black robe fringed in gold, his hands heavy with over-sized rings. Indeed, if Augustine de Chegney suggested some feral predator, then Elodore Pleasant suggested a vulture. Only in the eyes were the two men similar, for both viewed the world through cunning orbs, though the craftiness behind Pleasant's pale blue eyes was akin to that of the fox.

'Tell me,' the viscount mused, sloshing the last mouthful of wine about the bottom of his crystal glass, 'why do they call you "pleasant"?' The grey eyes narrowed and the nobleman rose from his seat. Angriely the viscount hurled the glass against the wall, its gleaming debris scattering across the hall. 'For as long as I have known you, I have heard only ill tidings from your mouth!' the viscount snarled.

'It is better that a friend deliver such news,' Pleasant replied, trying to keep his tone even, not let any anxiety cloud his words. 'One who knows your heart and might

better council you in such matters as these.'

'Was it not your council that advised I let that dolt Norval deal with Ursio and his men?' challenged Viscount de Chegney, his tone low and full of menace.

'Yes, my lord,' agreed Pleasant, bobbing his head like the carrion bird he so resembled. 'We have employed him for such matters before, and never had cause to regret...'

'My son is dead!' roared the viscount, clenching his fist in anger. 'And now this foreign rabble have my grandson as hostage, demanding I pay them twice the fee for their services as payment for his safe return!' The viscount scratched at the hairy growth on his throat and jowls. 'Tell me, Pleasant, what do you advise that I do? Hmm? Shall I pay these animals for killing one heir to ensure the return of another?'

'Begging your leave, my lord,' the black-garbed seneschal stuttered, 'but I do not think that paying them will achieve anything. They have been betrayed, and seek more than gold as compensation.'

'Do you think that thought has not occurred to me?' snorted the Viscount. 'But what other choice do I have? I have spent a lifetime expanding the realm and fortune of the de Chegneys, I shall not see it fail for want of an heir! We shall pay these vermin ten times what they ask, but I will have my grandson returned!'

'There is another way, my lord,' Pleasant said, not daring to let his eyes settle upon the Viscount in his present humour. 'We could recover the child ourselves. That would ensure his return and not force you into a compact with this mercenary rabble.'

'These men are not morons,' snapped the viscount. 'I would not have engaged them in the first place if they were. If Ursio even thinks my men are close to finding him, he will kill my grandson.'

'Then we shall not use any of your men,' Pleasant offered. 'I agree, the Tileans would certainly discover an armed force sometime before they themselves were in peril. But a single man? One man could discover their hiding place, infiltrate it and recover the child.'

'Know you of such a man?' the viscount asked, his tone dubious.

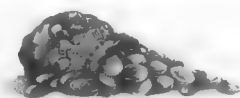
'Our smuggler friends in the Empire speak of a bounty hunter, a man named Brunner,' Pleasant answered. 'They say that once he is on a man's trail, he will follow them to the Wastes themselves, and return with his prey.'

'A bounty hunter?' scoffed the Viscount. 'You would entrust the safety of my grandson to a bounty hunter?'

'They say that this Brunner is of noble blood, that when he takes a commission, he always sees it through to the end,' the seneschal responded, somewhat defensively. 'His reputation is quite terrible amongst our friends, and in this case, that is to our benefit.'

The viscount considered Pleasant's council for a moment, his feral eyes narrowing as he thought. At last he turned his gaze back upon the vulture-like seneschal. 'Very well, Elodore, if you can find this bounty hunter, engage him. Tell him to bring me my grandson. Or Ursio's head.'

Pleasant bowed before his master. 'As you wish.'



ELODORE Pleasant and his hulking bodyguard pushed their way past a gang of drunken farmers and entered the cave-like gloom of The Braying Ass, the most disreputable of Albrechtsburg's taverns. Pleasant brought a perfumed handkerchief to his nose, trying to blot out the vile mixture of cheap beer, unwashed humanity and dry urine that wafted out of the tavern. Beside him, the bodyguard rolled his eyes, annoyed that his charge had already broken his advice to keep a low profile in this thieves' nest. Pleasant did not pay his protector the slightest notice but arrogantly pushed his way into the darkness.

Pleasant doubted if the rumours about the man's nobility could possibly be true. How any person of note could allow themselves to be surrounded by such filth and squalor was beyond the Bretonnian's ability to comprehend.

Pleasant scanned the room, his eyes lingering on every dirty bearded face, his gaze taking in the large oak bar, its surface nicked and pitted by countless brawls and endless games of mumble-peg. The burly Bretonnian man-at-arms beside Pleasant nudged the seneschal's arm, drawing his master's attention away from the antics of a fat coachman and a serving wench. Pleasant's gaze settled upon the dark corner his henchman indicated. The two

Bretonnians headed toward the isolated table and its sole occupant.

The man seated at the table was an unnervingly grim sight. In build, he was a well muscled man, displaying a quality of strength such as might grace a professional soldier rather than the brawn of a common labourer. The man's legs were enclosed to just below the knee in black leather boots with steel toes, while dark steel cuisses encased his upper legs, a faded eagles rampant visible on each piece of armour. A suit of brigandine armour protected his torso, a breastplate of fabulously rare gromril fastened over the cloth-and-metal armour. The dull tan of coarse fabric shirtsleeves was largely obscured by steel vambraces that encased his arms. His hands were clothed in black leather gauntlets, the knuckle of each glove sporting a tiny spike-like stud of metal. The man's head was covered by the rounded bowl of a sallet-helm, the face of the helmet concealing the man's features as completely as an executioner's hood. Icy blue eyes regarded the Bretonnians from behind the visor of the helm, while the exposed mouth below the armour sipped from a wooden cup.

'Do I have the distinction of speaking with the gentleman known as Brunner?' Pleasant said in his most fawning manner as he approached the darkened corner.

'Who wants to know?' came the guarded reply.

Pleasant's dour face broke into a wide grin. 'I am Elodore Pleasant, seneschal to his lordship the Viscount Augustine de Chegney,' the man said, lowering himself into the chair opposite that of the bounty hunter.

'I don't recall asking for company. Who invited you to sit down?' There was a note of challenge and warning in the bounty hunter's voice that froze Pleasant in mid-motion, his rear inches from the seat of the chair, his face inches away from the killer's. It was as if he had come face to face with a snarling wolf. Beads of perspiration gathered about Pleasant's brow. The hulking bodyguard took a step forward, hand falling to the pommel of his sword.

'Before he can draw that frog-stabber of his,' the bounty hunter's menacing voice rasped, 'I'll have your throat slit.' In the second it took the bodyguard to digest the threat, the bounty hunter erupted into

action. A silver flash of metal caught the tavern's dim light, then was pressed against the skin of Pleasant's throat, a bead of crimson surrounding the point. At the same time, the bounty killer's other hand rose from beneath the table, a small crossbow gripped in his gloved fist.

'We don't want any trouble,' Pleasant declared, rising slowly from the chair, the bounty hunter's dagger rising with him. A sidewise gesture of his hand made the seneschal's henchman sullenly back away. The bounty hunter set the crossbow pistol down upon the table, its lethal dart still pointing at the bodyguard, and removed the dagger from the chastened functionary's throat.

'Why are you looking for me?' demanded Brunner.

'I understand that you hunt men,' Pleasant stammered, dabbing at his bleeding throat with his perfumed handkerchief. 'And that you are the best there is to be had in that line of enterprise.'

'That much is obvious,' Brunner looked across the dingy tavern. 'It would take quite a reputation to bring so fine a gentleman as yourself to a place like this.' The bounty hunter lifted a small wooden cup to his lips. 'What's the job?' he asked before sipping at the schnapps.

The anxious look on the Bretonnian's face eased somewhat and Pleasant smiled. 'The castle of the viscount's son was ransacked by mercenaries discharged from my lord's service,' the seneschal began. 'They killed my master's son and his wife, as well as very nearly every living thing in the place.'

The bounty hunter slowly set the cup down, his cold eyes locking on those of the functionary. 'I have already heard news of the unpleasantness across the border.' Pleasant was visibly shocked by the bounty hunter's words. 'I make it my business to be well-informed,' Brunner explained. 'A man's life sometimes balances upon the merest shred of information.'

'The brigands have taken the viscount's grandson with them,' Pleasant continued. 'They are demanding ransom for his safe return.'

'I collect bounties, not children,' Brunner replied, lifting the wooden cup to his mouth again.

'The viscount is prepared to pay you very well,' Pleasant reached into the breast of his tunic and withdrew a large leather pouch. 'Two hundred gold crowns,' the Bretonnian said, setting the bag down on the table. Several sets of eyes turned toward the scene as the distinct report of coins jostling against one another insinuated itself into the clamour of the tavern's atmosphere. Brunner reached a hand toward the bag, running his gloved digits across the cool leather surface. 'One hundred now, the rest when the viscount's heir is safely returned.' Brunner turned his helmeted head away, leaning back in his chair so that his back rested against the tavern's peeling plaster on wood wall.

'A fair price,' the bounty hunter admitted. 'But I am not interested.' Brunner bolted the rest of his schnapps and set the cup down upon the table.

'I could speak to the viscount,' Pleasant said, his tone desperate. 'He would surely agree to any reasonable sum.'

Brunner sucked his teeth and stared at the Bretonnian. 'I don't want your money,' he said, his tone menacing. 'I've had more than enough of you Bretonnians and your lordly ways. I am my own man, not some foppish snail-eater's errand boy.'

Pleasant's mouth dropped in disbelief as the bounty hunter's crude words impacted upon his ears. The functionary trembled in outrage, wishing he had more of the viscount's men with him so he could teach this villain some manners. The seneschal's tongue worked itself to voice a retort but all that emerged was a feeble croak. The bounty hunter turned away, motioning for a serving wench to bring him another drink, his would-be patron already dismissed from his attention. Balling his fist in outrage, Pleasant rose and stormed away from the table.

'This has been a fool's errand,' Pleasant snapped as he passed his bodyguard. The other Bretonnian took his place at the seneschal's side. The two men marched their way toward the feeble light seeping under the tavern's door. Neither man noticed the scruffy figures who had preceded them into the street, or the two rat-faced men who followed after them.



ELODORE Pleasant's face was a mask of sullen, brooding rage as he stomped through the dirty streets of the township. The seneschal dabbed his handkerchief against the cut the bounty hunter's blade had left on his throat. The outright audacity of the scum! Pleasant wondered if he might not divert some of the funds he had quietly diverted from the viscount's coffers towards seeing some justice meted out upon the arrogant vermin. But such thoughts of revenge were for another day. For now, there was still the matter of rescuing the viscount's grandson, or seeing his abductors dead.

Pleasant was so lost in his thoughts that he did not notice the darkened lane his steps had carried him into, nor the warning hiss of his bodyguard. It was only the sight of three men standing in his path that snapped Pleasant from his dark humour, bringing his attention back to his surroundings. Pleasant looked at the men, their dirty, grimy clothes, their unwashed faces and gap-toothed grins. The Bretonnian's face wore an expression of contempt as his eyes met those of the men, but the flesh that hung from his cheeks trembled with nervous anxiety as he noticed the clubs and blades the men gripped in their dust-blackened hands. He chanced a look back at his bodyguard, noticing for the first time that the soldier's sword was drawn, and that two more ruffians had closed upon them from the opposite side of the lane.

'I am on my master's business,' Pleasant said in a voice he hoped conveyed more authority than the fear that was building within him. 'Give me space to pass.'

One of the ruffians swaggered forward, a short-bladed sword clutched in his hand. He flipped a strand of dirty blond hair from his forehead as it fell into his eyes. The man grinned, exposing a set of yellow and pitted teeth. He spat a glob of phlegm into the dust.

'We 'eard 'bout yer little errand in da Brayin' Ass,' the ruffian said, his voice raspy. 'Two-hunert gold fer retrievin' some wine-swiller's brat.' The ruffian clucked his tongue. 'That's a pretty price, no mistake.'

'I am afraid that I am not at liberty to offer that particular commission to anyone but the man my master considered skilful enough to accomplish it,' Pleasant tried to keep his cool, but was all too aware of the beads of sweat trickling from his brow.

'Is that so?' the blond-haired man sneered. 'So we can't take this little job from yer? Can't earn us the two-hunert?' The man cast a mock regretful look at his companions and sighed. 'Well, I guess we'll just have to settle for the hunert yer carry'n!'

The men laughed as they advanced toward Pleasant. The hulking Bretonnian bodyguard was soon beside the seneschal, trying to interpose himself between both the three men closing upon his charge and the other two quietly advancing from the rear. All five robbers were chuckling under their breath, their eyes gleaming like those of a wolf pack lighting upon a tethered horse.

'Easiest money I ever done made,' the leader of the thieves snorted as he closed upon Pleasant, drawing his sword back for a sideways swipe at the Bretonnian. The man's chuckle trailed off into a gurgling death rattle as a spike of steel impacted into his throat. The sword clattered from his hands and he fell to his knees, dirty hands fumbling at the crimson tide gushing from the hole in his windpipe where the crossbow bolt had torn its way through his neck.

The other muggers were thrown into confusion and disarray by the sudden death of their leader. It only lasted a moment, but even so slight an instant was enough. The hulking Bretonnian smashed his shield against the leg of one of the club-wielding men closing upon the Bretonnians from behind. The bone snapped under the impact and the ruffian fell to the dirt street, howling with agony. The bodyguard lashed out at the other robber with a downward stroke of his blade, the thief barely managing to raise his own sword to parry the blow.

The men facing Pleasant snarled and made to leap at the seneschal, determined to claim the weighty purse of gold before making good their escape. But even as they sprung into action, a new player introduced himself into the fray. A heavy falchion sword ripped through the spine of one of the men as the steel blade was thrust through his body from behind. The man didn't scream, his eyes instead staring in incomprehension at the bloodied steel that protruded from the gory ruin of his belly. The eyes had glassed over by the time the blade was withdrawn and the robber's body fell into the dust.

The other thief turned, glaring at the black-helmeted figure that had seemingly materialised from nowhere to spoil their

game. He raised his stout club, its fire-blackened wood further enhanced by a cluster of iron spikes driven into the cudgel. With an oath that might be voiced by any cornered animal, the robber charged at his foe. The face below the visor of the sallet-helm smiled as the ruffian came towards him. With one hand, he raised the falchion sword, notching the thief's wooden weapon as he swung at him. The robber spat a second curse and renewed his attack. Again the armoured man parried the robber's attack with his bloodied sword, but this time the man's other hand leapt into action. As the thief was again repelled by the man's guard, the armoured fighter's left hand smashed into his face, plunging the blade of the dagger it held into the robber's eye.

The robber dropped to the ground, screaming and writhing in agony, burying his bleeding face in the dirt. Brunner smiled as he strode towards the thief and calmly raised his falchion. There was a final cry of pain and the crunch of breaking bone as the bounty hunter plunged his sword between the wounded robber's shoulders.

Pleasant stared about him, his mouth gaping open at the carnage he had witnessed. He had seen many combats in his time, but seldom had he seen a conflict begin and end with such swift dispatch. He looked for his bodyguard, finding the man already walking back towards him, wiping blood from his blade. The seneschal then turned his gaze back upon the bounty hunter. He watched as Brunner withdrew a rag from his belt and wiped the blood from his sword before sheathing the weapon. The bloodied dagger he returned to his gloved hand as he advanced toward the Bretonnian.

'We were lucky you came along,' the nervous seneschal stammered, the corners of his mouth twitching. 'It would have been a near thing. I am no warrior, and all five of these men against my bodyguard might not have turned out so well for me.'

Brunner didn't speak, instead his eyes turned toward the blond leader of the robbers, his breath still gurgling from the wound in his neck. 'Let's not be all day about it,' the bounty hunter's harsh voice hissed. Leaning over the dying man, Brunner raked the dagger across his throat, letting the new-made corpse pitch forward into the street.

'There was no luck in my finding you,' the bounty hunter said, turning his eyes toward Pleasant. 'I followed you from the tavern.'

'Followed us?' Pleasant asked. 'Then you have reconsidered the commission from the Viscount de Chegney?' Hope flared in the seneschal's devious heart.

'Reconsidered?' there was actually a suggestion of mirth in the bounty killer's voice as he repeated the Bretonnian's comment. 'I intended to take the job the moment you sat at my table.'

Pleasant's eyes sharpened, his face screwing into a suspicious leer. 'Then why did you refuse my offer?'

Brunner rose and stalked toward the other side of the lane. The ruffian the bodyguard had smashed with his shield was trying to crawl away. Brunner set a booted heel against the man's broken leg, pinning him in place and bringing a fresh cry of pain from the robber.

'You made yourself a target, showing your wealth in such a den of jackals,' the bounty hunter shook his head. 'I had to see what sort of rats would scurry out of the shadows to relieve you of that fat pouch of gold.' Brunner looked down at the groaning man at his feet. 'Though I must say I am less than impressed by the results. I doubt if I shall get more than thirty silver for these sorry cutthroats.'

'You used me as bait!' howled Pleasant. His earlier glee at the bounty hunter's acceptance of the viscount's commission had once again been overtaken by a fervent desire to see the arrogant commoner painfully put back in his place.

'I would prefer to think of it as seizing an opportunity that presented itself.' Brunner returned his attention to the man at his feet.

'I trust that you will show more expediency in retrieving the viscount's grandson,' Pleasant declared, choking down the more choice words that threatened to explode from his mouth. 'Time is of the essence in this matter.'

'I just have a few things to finish here,' Brunner said, still considering the man at his feet. 'If time is so valuable, I suggest you attend to effecting your return to Bretonnia. You can give me the details I will require on the road.'

Pleasant bristled under the bounty killer's tone. He, a viscount's seneschal, was being dismissed by a hired sword? Perhaps there

was truth in the rumours of Brunner's noble birth; Pleasant had never encountered such audacity in anyone that did not have some manner of breeding in their background. With a sharp word to his bodyguard, the fuming seneschal turned away from the bounty hunter.

'Oh, messenger,' Brunner called after the Bretonnian. Pleasant turned to face the killer again. Brunner held a gloved hand in the Bretonnian's direction. 'The hundred gold crowns.' With a muttered oath, Pleasant savagely dug the pouch from the pocket within his tunic and tossed it to the bounty hunter. Brunner caught the jingling sack one-handed and tucked it into his belt.



THE BOUNTY HUNTER casually set a few more sticks into the circle of his campfire and unlimbered his packhorse of its tack and harness, hobbling the animal's legs to keep it from wandering too far. His riding horse, a magnificent bay, he left untethered. There were few things the bounty hunter placed any trust in, but the fealty of his Bretonnian warhorse was one of those. He could be certain that the animal would stay by his side, come fire or sorcery. Brunner patted the great horse's muzzle with a black gloved hand and returned to preparing his camp.

As Brunner continued to arrange his packs and blankets, the bounty hunter's attention was only minimally upon his task. This was the place Pleasant had named as the rendezvous with the kidnappers. Brunner had a deep knowledge of this region, certainly a more intimate familiarity than a rabble of Tilean mercenaries could acquire in a few months of employment. He had counted three men watching the barren glade from supposed places of concealment. He could have easily disposed of them but he had no way of knowing what other precautions the ransomers might have made against any treachery on the part of the viscount. Brunner had thus ridden into the lurking mercenaries' supposed control was prepared to let the Tileans make the next move.

Brunner settled himself down upon a blanket, propping his back against his saddle. The killer faced the fire, seemingly unconcerned by what might be transpiring

in the trees all around him. But the bounty hunter's steely gaze was all the time scanning the edges of the clearing, all the time his ears were listening for the sharp crack of a twig or the rustle of a branch. Beneath the cover of his blanket, Brunner's hands kept a loose grip upon his weapons.

'Hallo to camp,' an accented Tilean voice shouted from the darkness. 'May I share your fire?' There was a note of question as well as suspicion in the Tilean's voice. Brunner allowed himself an inward smile. His elaborately staged calmness and unconcern had disarmed the men. They were unsure if he was the man they were expecting or just some chance wanderer who had muddled along into their affairs.

'Provided you be no Ulricite zealot, please yourself,' the bounty hunter called back. That reply should further disorder the villain's mind, Brunner thought.

The Tilean strode forward, the fire revealing his olive-hued features. He was a young man, a bright slash of a duelling scar across his cheek, a thin moustache worming its way across his lip. The mercenary wore a suit of loose fitting armour, a broadsword at his hip and a crossbow slung over his back. Even as the man strolled forward with a seemingly casual swagger, he rested a hand on the pommel of his blade.

'I might be spending a cold night in the crook of a tree,' the Tilean said, his eyes taking in Brunner's figure, a smile flickering on his face as he saw the sword and other weapons resting near the reclining man. Near enough to reach should any visitor to his camp think to cause him any trouble, but not near enough to reach should that visitor have friends lurking in the dark with crossbows trained upon the warrior before that trouble began.

'Then, by all means, warm yourself,' Brunner offered, inclining his head towards the fire. The Tilean advanced, making a display of warming his left hand above the dancing tongues of flame. His other hand still hung at his side, casually resting on the pommel of his sword.

'It is by Taal's grace that I saw your fire,' the Tilean commented, his eyes still studying what he could see of the face below the visor of his host's helm. 'How come you to be in this blighted place?'

'I should ask you the same question,' Brunner replied, his gaze piercing that of the mercenary.

'My horse threw me,' the mercenary answered. 'I was acting as an outrider for a wine merchant who hopes to establish a new route through the pass to sell his grapes in the Empire. I must have ridden too far out for them to hear my oaths as the wretched pony unseated me and ran into the hills. You can be sure I will have some words with the man who sold me that gangly brute.'

A smile appeared on Brunner's face. He had been listening to the creaks and cracks emanating from the dark, gauging the position of those who made the sounds. His watchers had drawn closer, eager to catch every word of the exchange.

'Strange,' Brunner said, spitting into the dust. He fastened his eyes on the Tilean once more, the mouth below the black slash of his helm split in a mocking smile. 'Do you not find it strange that a wine merchant would employ a foreigner as an outrider, rather than a man native to the region?'

An angry snarl appeared on the Tilean's features. An accomplished liar the man might not be, but to be caught in a lie was insulting to him all the same. The blade at his side flew from its sheath, the firelight dancing in the exposed fang of steel.

Thunder and smoke rose from the reclining figure on the blankets. Fiery pain blazed into the Tilean's chest, pitching him backward with such force that he crashed upon his back in the campfire. The mercenary's body rolled from the flames, his armour smoking, a wail of suffering rising from his throat.

The violent flash and boom of the discharge of the blackpowder gun the bounty hunter had fired through the fabric of the blanket momentarily startled and disoriented the two crossbowmen in the trees. The veteran killers did not hesitate for more than a breath before snapping the strings of their weapons, sending two steel bolts slamming into the target they had carefully marked. But in the thick grey smoke, the Tileans were not able to see that their would-be victim had thrown himself into motion even as the crack and boom of the gun's firing resounded across the night. Brunner had flung his body to the side at once, rolling away from the blankets and the saddle, away from the carefully laid out weapons to the left of his

previous position. One bolt impacted in the centre of the blanket; another struck midway between the blanket and the weapons.

Brunner kicked aside the pack of provisions, lifting the strange crossbow he had secreted beneath the leather bags. A long black box sat atop the weapon and, unlike the weapons of the Tileans, the implement of death the bounty hunter now hefted bore not one but two taut steel bowstrings. Brunner sent one missile crashing into the chest of the crossbowman to his left before the mercenary even had time to register the fact that his prey had escaped his carefully prepared shot. The second man had a single moment to react as Brunner spun the weapon in his direction. Panic seized the man and instead of dropping to the ground, the Tilean fumbled at his weapon, trying to reload it. The second bolt from Brunner's repeating crossbow punched through the wooden stock of the Tilean's weapon and embedded itself in the man's lung. The mercenary fell then, a fraction of a second too late to save his life.

Brunner strode across the clearing, fetching up his sword from the display of weapons and calmly walked over to the still writhing man he had peppered with the blast of his firearm. The Tilean was cursing freely, his body wracked with pain. As he sensed his enemy drawing near, the Tilean stretched a bloodied hand towards his sword. Brunner set his boot on the mercenary's hand. He flipped the mercenary onto his back with his other foot. The armour was flecked in blood and pitted by the small steel pellets the bounty killer's gun had disgorged.

'You're lucky,' Brunner observed as the Tilean's face twisted into a grimace. 'The armour stopped most of the impact. The shot barely nipped your skin.' In truth, Brunner had been thankful for that armour. He needed one of the men alive.

'In case you are wondering,' Brunner said, turning his eyes from the wound in the mercenary's chest to the man's face, 'Viscount de Chegney did send me.' The information brought a groan not entirely of pain from the Tilean. 'He wants his grandson back, but he prefers to pay for him with steel instead of gold.' The bounty hunter put all of his weight to the boot crushing the man's hand, bringing a new cry of pain. 'Perhaps you would like to tell me where the viscount's heir is?'

'If I tell you, how do I know you won't kill me?' the Tilean snarled through clenched teeth. Brunner favoured the man with a frigid smile.

'Because if I killed you after you lied to me and made me lose the bounty the viscount is offering for his grandson, I wouldn't be able to kill you later for lying to me.' Brunner ground the mercenary's hand under his heel, twisting the broken bones against one another, wrenching another cry from his prisoner. 'So, where are your friends hiding?'



UNDER COVER of night, Brunner replaced his gear on his packhorse and threw his saddle onto the back of the towering bay. He spared a single glance at the man he had tied to the trunk of the gnarled old tree the locals called the Wizard's Bones. The Tilean glared back at him from above the linen gag the bounty hunter had shoved down his throat.

'You seem to harbour me some ill will,' Brunner commented as he lifted himself onto the back of his charger. 'Perhaps you have called down all manner of curses on my head.' Brunner smiled beneath his helm. 'But consider this. If your friends kill me, do you think they will come back here looking for you? Do you think anybody is going to happen along here before hunger or thirst does for you? Or perhaps a pack of wolves will decide to pick your bones clean before that.' Brunner clicked his tongue and turned his steed's head away from the clearing.

'Just something to keep your mind occupied,' the bounty hunter said, as he disappeared into the night.



THE LONELY grey tower stabbed into the night sky like the defiant fist of some fallen giant. Brambles and weeds encircled the structure, choking doorways and windows with dry brittle limbs. Massive grey stones littered the ground all about the forlorn tower, falling prey to the same verminous growths that had surrounded the fort from which they had fallen.

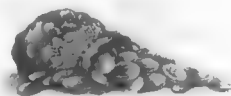
Cold, hard eyes gazed at the tower from the shadows of the forest. Brunner noted the faint flicker of firelight in one of the lower windows of the tower. The captured ransom collector had told the bounty killer the truth, but, then, Brunner had never doubted that he would. Perhaps the bounty hunter would even hold to his part of the bargain and return for the man before the wolves made a meal of him.

Brunner considered the tower. Once there would have been a scarlet pennant flying from the now broken roof, displaying the drake rampant that was the device of the Baron von Drakenburg. Once there would have been four sentries patrolling the rampart that peeped from below that roof, each dressed in the von Drakenburg livery, each a veteran marksman, for the Baron von Drakenburg would hire only the most capable of men. The face beneath the black helm smiled mirthlessly. Perhaps the baron had not been such a good judge of men, for he had been betrayed in the end, after all. Although, it had to be admitted, that even the traitor had been very capable.

Brunner studied the rampart again, satisfying himself that only a single man patrolled the roof, a weary looking Tilean with a crossbow who barely spared a glance towards the forest as he made his regular sweep of the battlement. Brunner watched the mercenary, studying his regular, unvaried movements. The sentry was slipping into that dire, inattentive boredom that always threatened to dull a sentinel's wariness. With the man's mind wandering away from the tedium of his duties, his eyes might miss a dark shape emerging from the cover of the forest. No doubt his watchfulness was not so far-gone that he would fail to see that same figure creep to the base of the tower itself. But there would be no need for the bounty hunter to test the guard's capability that far.

Brunner made his way to a large overgrown bush, a massive thorny brute that promised no berries or leaves to any that might show interest in it, only the sting of dagger-like nettles. Brunner grabbed the bush, pulling it back from the small rise it leaned upon. As the bush moved, a dark opening revealed itself, a hole that dug its way into the rubble-strewn plain. Without hesitation, the bounty hunter worked his body past the unwholesome plant and into the darkness of the narrow tunnel. A

predatory smile crossed Brunner's features. The Tileans might have made the fortalice their lair, but they would soon discover that they knew very little about their temporary stronghold.



THE MERCENARY wiped the crust from his eyes and refocused his attention to the dim landscape beyond the fortalice. The narrow window afforded only a slight view of the terrain, but Ursio had wanted a man stationed here just the same. He was taking no chances that any party of the viscount's knights bent on revenge would fall upon the mercenaries without warning. Hence, Ursio had placed two watch-points, one atop the tower, in the ruin of its roof, and a second here, in a damp room mid-way up the tower's height. The wily captain was always a careful man. Men sneaking up on the tower might see the sentry above, and hide themselves from his vision, but having seen one sentinel, they would not think to look for a second and would perhaps reveal themselves to the concealed watchman.

It was a sound theory, but it did not change the fact that the Tilean's post was a cold, dreary and boring one. Not for the first time, the Tilean began to recite old ballads to himself, imagining the times when he had first heard them, carousing with his comrades through the taverns of Luccini after a successful campaign. The mercenary's soft humming ended in a ghastly gurgle as blood bubbled into his throat. He toppled forward, his body sliding off the dagger blade that had neatly punctured the back of his neck.

'You were off key,' the grim figure of the mercenary's killer stated, wiping the blood off the dagger with a bit of rag. Brunner turned away from the corpse and made his way back to the far wall of the chamber. His gloved hand caressed a worn stone several inches above the height of his head. Soundlessly, the wall sank inward. Brunner waited a moment, then slipped into the darkness from which he had emerged to kill the watchman.



BRUNNER EMERGED from the shadows that claimed the collapsed section of tile and timber which sagged across the greater portion of the roof. He watched the Tilean crossbowman making his rounds for a moment. The bounty hunter had finished scouting the tower. He had found that there were nine villains within it. Three were bivouacked in a long chamber that had once served as a barracks for the tower, busily playing at dice, gambling with the ransom money they had not yet earned. Another had been keeping watch over the horses, though now the horses were keeping watch over his body. Three others, one of whom he took to be the leader, were with the child and a nursemaid, busily plotting a triumphant return to Tilea and the strengthening of their depleted band. The other two had been the watchmen, the dead one below and the man death now stalked.

The drowsy sentinel finished his circuit and turned to retrace his steps. His mouth dropped open in shock as he found himself face to face with an armoured figure, its face hidden within a helmet of blackened steel. Icy eyes burned back into the young Tilean's stunned gaze. A sharp stabbing agony shot up the left side of the mercenary's body and the crossbow clattered to the stone floor. The bounty hunter withdrew a bloody fang of steel, the same he had already used to send two of this man's companions to Morr's realm this night. The young mercenary gasped as the pain seared into his vitals and blood seeped from his side. The bounty hunter's gloved hands gripped the wounded man's body. He turned the sentry towards the crenelated wall. Stealth had played its part. Now it was time to let the sheep know that the wolf had arrived.

'Scream for me,' the bounty killer's murderous voice hissed into the Tilean's ear as he flung the injured man from the top of the tower.



THE SENTRY'S wail of horror echoed through the corridors of the fortalice in the brief instant before it was silenced in a dull crunch of bone. Cries of surprise and alarm sounded from the two rooms still occupied by the Tilean kidnappers. Ursio met the gaze of the foremost man from the former barracks.

'Find out what is going on!' the mercenary captain snarled. 'And kill it!' he added, slamming the door shut after him.

The trio of mercenaries crept up the stairway, swords held before them, making their way to the roof. They had already discovered the body of the lower watchman, removing any question that someone was loose in the tower. The men were wary, cautious and more than a little enraged. At least one more of their comrades gone, another debt of blood to be collected in this vendetta with the Bretonnian viscount.

The rearmost of the Tileans was only a few paces behind the leading pair when he paused. He had heard a sound: the scrape of stone against stone. He turned, facing a dark opening in the wall that had not been there a moment before. He opened his mouth to shout, but found his words silenced as a length of steel tore into his gut.

'Aren't you pleased you found me?' Brunner asked the dying man as he pushed him off his sword. The bounty hunter turned his body as he emerged from the concealed passage and made ready to meet the attack of the other Tileans as they reacted to the sound of their companion's demise. Brunner smiled to himself. The men would join their friends soon enough.



URSIO STARED at the door of the room that had once served as the quarters for the commander of the tower. The sounds of combat, the ring of steel on steel and the gasping cries of dying men had sounded from beyond that now closed portal. The mercenary captain cast a nervous look over at his remaining men. The wiry, scar-faced Vernini nodded at his commander, hefting the loaded crossbow in his hands. Vernini was the best shot among all his men. Whoever opened that door would be rewarded with Vernini's quarrel in his heart.

The brutish mass of Verdo glowered at Ursio. The homicidal thug was still chafing from the violent reprimand his captain had given him. When they had discovered that there were intruders in their hideout, a fit of rage had consumed the black-bearded mercenary. Before Ursio could stop him, Verdo had snapped the neck of the abducted nursemaid with his bare hands and was

lumbering toward the basket that contained the baby before a blow from the hilt of Ursio's sword had restored some degree of reason in the thug's murderous mind. Verdo stood, his heavy cavalry mace clenched in his hands, his chest heaving, every muscle in his body tensed in anticipation. Ursio thought his brutish comrade was not unlike a hound straining at the leash. Or a Norse berserker working himself into a frenzy.

Ursio's roving eyes rolled to the basket and the crying form within. The mercenary captain had lost everything because of the Viscount de Chegney's treachery. The small life in that basket represented the only way Ursio could make his deceitful former patron suffer. The Tilean's face settled into a snarl. He pulled his long-bladed dagger from its sheath and moved toward the woven basket.

Just then, the heavy door swung open, its rusty hinges groaning. Vernini did not hesitate. The sharp snap of his crossbow discharging drowned out the creaking sound of the old hinges. The bolt sped into the shape that filled the doorway, smashing through leather tunic, flesh and ribcage. The body jerked as the bolt impacted, then fell forward as it was pushed into the room.

Brunner wasted no time discarding his cadaverous shield, shifting to the right as the body pitched to the floor. Vernini was already hastily reloading his crossbow, swinging his body about to bring the still unloaded weapon to bear on Brunner. Ursio froze above the basket, dagger in hand; his eyes locked upon the black-helmed figure that had slain so many of his men.

'Blood of Khaine!' the mercenary swore as recognition came to him. 'Brunner!'

As if to punctuate the Tilean's oath, the bounty hunter fired the smouldering weapon gripped in his left hand. The shot from the black powder pistol smashed into Vernini's forehead with a force far greater than that of the marksman's crossbow. The mercenary's face disappeared in a red ruin as the shot punched through the Tilean's skull and the man was dead before his body finished falling. Brunner let the spent pistol fall too, dropping the weapon and drawing the heavy falchion from the scabbard at his side.

As the roar of the firearm began to fade, it was replaced by a thunderous bellow no less violent. Verdo charged forward like a maddened bull, swinging his mace at the bounty hunter as if it were the avenging maul

of Ulric himself. The bounty hunter managed to dodge the powerful but clumsy blow, kicking the brute in the knee. Verdo grunted, but did not stagger. Howling his wrath, the Tilean lashed out at Brunner again, this time finding his weapon blocked by the intercepting steel of the bounty killer's sword.

Ursio cursed again, gathering up the child from the basket, heedless of the wailing infant's cries. Keeping the baby pressed against his chest, the mercenary captain circled around the duelling figures of Brunner and Verdo. He did not favour his thuggish comrade's chances against the notorious bounty hunter, but perhaps Verdo could keep the hunter occupied long enough for Ursio to effect his own escape. As if to speed Ursio's flight, as he neared the doorway, he saw Brunner's blade slip past Verdo's guard, slashing the man's left arm almost to the bone.

The Tilean was running when he passed from the chamber of death and into the corridor outside. His steps were heavy and swift. He did not see the tiny glittering objects strewn about the floor, the sinister little steel spiders that met his weighty footfalls. They were caltrops, metal spikes designed to cripple warhorses, dropped by the bounty hunter to maim any escaping prey. As Ursio's booted foot encountered its first caltrop, the metal spike pierced leather and flesh, gouging a hole through the sole of his foot. Ursio cried out in pain, flinging both child and blade from him as both hands instantly sought to arrest his fall. The mercenary captain landed badly, another caltrop punching through the palm of his hand, three others digging into his chest and legs as he impacted against stone, another puncturing his right cheek.

Ursio writhed in pain, trying to dig the caltrop from his face with his uninjured hand. The sound of boots scuffling against flagstone brought a new horror to the Tilean. Ursio looked up to see Brunner framed in the doorway, wiping the lifeblood of Verdo from his sword with a rag torn from the mercenary's tunic before sheathing his blade. Ursio saw the bounty hunter cast a glance at the small swaddled object that lay against the wall, now silent and unmoving. The face below the visor of the helm was unreadable as Brunner strode toward Ursio's prone form.

'Wait!' the mercenary stammered. 'I'll go with you! I won't try to escape!' Ursio knew who had set the infamous bounty hunter on him, he knew that he could expect slow death and torture when he was delivered to the sadistic Bretonnian viscount. But it would take days to reach the viscount's castle, and Ursio was desperate to gain even so small a respite from his journey to the gardens of Morr. 'You can take me to the viscount. I won't resist!'

Brunner leaned over the pleading sell-sword. 'I will take you to the viscount,' his cold voice stated. Ursio's eyes grew wide with fright as he saw the bounty hunter draw a large serrated knife from its sheath. 'But the viscount is only paying me for your head.'



'MY GRANDSON is dead then?' the question emerged from Viscount Augustine de Chegney's mouth like the forlorn growl of a wretched and dying wolf.

Brunner looked up at the seated nobleman upon his raised throne-like chair. He could imagine the man sitting there – not as he was, a morose creature who had seen his last chance for posterity taken from him, who knew that his long and noble line would now end with his last breath – but as a cruel and sadistic brute, resplendent in treacherous triumph. He could imagine the viscount sitting there, slowly sipping his wine as a sobbing maiden with long golden hair washed his feet with her tears, begging with the beast that had become her father to spare the battered and broken man whose blood still stained the stones of the hall's floor. He could almost hear the viscount's words of conciliation, of acquiescence to the pleas of his daughter-in-law. He could almost see the shabby, lice-ridden shapes of the slavers standing in the shadows of the room, there to ensure that every promise the viscount made to the maiden would become a lie.

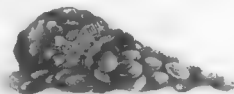
'They never had the boy,' the bounty hunter's cold voice said. 'After leaving the castle, they killed the nurse and the baby, feeling that their prisoners would be too much of a burden to maintain. They never intended to return the child to you,' the bounty hunter concluded. He reached over and carefully

unwrapped the small knotted cloth bundle that sat at his side upon the floor. The soiled cloth unfolded itself and the head of Ursio cast its sightless eyes upon the viscount.

The viscount trembled with emotion, one hand rising to conceal his face from the bounty hunter. With his other hand the nobleman gestured to his seneschal. 'Pay the man,' the viscount spoke through his fingers.

Elodore Pleasant shambled forward, withdrawing a leather pouch from the breast of his tunic. Brunner rose, opening his hand, letting the heavy sack of money sink into his palm. The bounty hunter bowed slightly to Pleasant.

Brunner favoured the viscount with a final icy stare. The viscount looked back, seeing only the hired killer his henchman had engaged. Brunner bowed again, leaving the viscount to consider all that he had lost.



THE ARMOURED traveller emerged from the rear room of the tavern, leaving the young woman and the quietly sleeping baby behind. He turned his black-helmeted head towards the innkeeper, a slightly balding man in early middle age. The merchant gulped as he met the icy eyes of the bounty hunter.

'When I brought the child here three days ago,' the voice beneath the helm rasped, 'I promised you gold if you would care for him.' The man's gloved hand placed a leather pouch upon the counter of the bar, the sound of clinking metal whispering across the tavern as the bag came to rest. The innkeeper stepped forward, placing a protective hand on the bag of money.

'Rest assured, sir,' he said, his voice betraying his nervousness, 'I shall look after him as though he were my own.'

'You will do better than that,' the warrior said, his tone slipping still lower. 'Look after him as though his life were your own.' The bounty hunter strode towards the door. 'Because it is.'

'I shall return from time to time,' Brunner said over his shoulder as he opened the door of the tavern. 'To check on my grandson, and to bring you more gold. Take good care of him, Wiedemann.' The bounty hunter's last words seemed to linger as he closed the door.

'I'll find out if you don't.' ♣



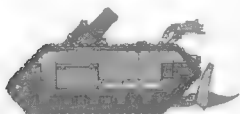
FIGHT OR FLIGHT

A CIAPHAS CAIN ADVENTURE

BY SANDY MITCHELL

Like any newly-commissioned young commissar I faced my first assignment with an eagerness mixed with trepidation. I was, after all, the visible embodiment of the will of the Emperor Himself; and I could scarce suppress the tiny voice which bade me wonder if, when tested, I would truly prove worthy of the trust bestowed upon me. When the test came at last, in the blood and glory of the battlefield, I had my answer; and my life changed forever.

Ciaphas Cain, 'To Serve the Emperor: A Commissar's Life,' 104. M42



IF THERE'S A single piece of truth among all the pious humbug and retrospective arse-covering that passes for my autobiography, it's the last four words of that paragraph. When I look back over the past hundred years of cowardice, truth-bending, bowel-loosening terror, and sheer dumb luck that somehow propelled me to the dizzy heights of Hero of the Imperium, I can truthfully point to that grubby little skirmish on a forgotten mining world as the incident which made me what I am.

I'd been a fully-fledged commissar for almost eight weeks when I arrived on Desolatia IV, seven of them spent travelling in the warp, and I could tell right away that my new unit wasn't happy to receive me. There was a single Salamander waiting at the edge of the landing field as I stepped off the shuttle,

its sand-scoured desert camo bearing the markings of the Valhallan 12th Field Artillery. But there was no sign of the senior officers that protocol demanded should meet a newly-arrived commissar. Just a single, bored-looking trooper, stripped down to the bare minimum of what might pass for a uniform, making the best of what little shade the parked vehicle offered. He glanced up from his slate of 'artistic engravings' as I appeared, and shambled in my general direction, his boots kicking up little puffs of the baking yellow dust.

'Carry your bag, sir?' He didn't even attempt a salute.

'That's fine,' I said hastily. 'It's not heavy.' His body odour preceded him like a personal force bubble. The briefing slate I'd glanced at before making the joyous discovery that the transport ship was stuffed with crewmen still under the fond illusion that games of chance had something to do with luck had mentioned that the Valhallans were from an ice world, so it was no surprise to me that the baking heat of Desolatia was making him sweat heavily, but I'd hardly expected to be met by a walking bioweapon.

I overrode the gag reflex and adopted an expression of amiable good humour that had got me out of trouble innumerable times during my years at the schola, as well as into it as often as I could contrive.

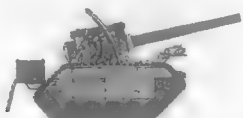
'Commissar Cain,' I said. 'And you are...?'

'Gunner Jurgen. Colonel sends his apologies, but he's busy.'

'No doubt,' I said. The ground crew were starting to unload the cargo, anonymous crates and pieces of mining machinery larger than I was floated past on lift pallets. The mines were the reason we were here; to ensure the uninterrupted supply of something or other to the forgeworlds of the Imperium despite the presence of an ork raiding party, which had been unpleasantly surprised to find an Imperial Guard troopship in orbit waiting for a minor warpstorm to subside when they arrived. Precisely what we were defending from our rapidly dwindling foes would be somewhere in the briefing slate, I supposed.

The mine habs loomed above us, clinging like lichen to the sides of the mountain their inhabitants had all but hollowed out. To a hive boy such as myself they looked comfortably nostalgic, albeit a little on the cramped side. The total population of the colony was just a few hundred thousand, including elders and kids; just a village really by Imperial standards.

I followed Jurgen back to the Salamander, weaving through the thickening scrum of workers; he walked straight towards it, unimpeded, the miasma from his unwashed socks clearing a path as effectively as a chainsword. As I swung my kitbag aboard I found myself wondering if coming here had been a mistake after all.



THE JOURNEY WAS uneventful; nothing so assertive as a landmark interrupted the monotony of the desert road once the mountains had diminished behind us to a low smudge against the horizon. The only thing even approaching scenery was the occasional burned-out hulk of an ork battlewagon.

'You must be looking forward to getting out of here,' I remarked, enjoying the sensation of the wind through my hair and revelling in the fact that perched up

behind the gunner's shield, I was mercifully insulated from Jurgen's odour. He shrugged.

'As the Emperor wills.' He said that a lot. I was beginning to realise that where his intellect should have been was a literally-minded adherence to Imperial doctrine which would have had my old tutors at the schola dancing with glee. If they'd ever deigned to do anything so undignified, of course.

Gradually the outline of the artillery park began to resolve itself through the heat haze. It had been sited in the lee of a low bluff, which rose out of the parching sand like an island in a sea of grit; the Valhallans having adapted their instinctive appreciation of blizzard conditions to the sandstorms prevailing here without too much difficulty. Bulldozed berms extended out from the rockface, extending the defensive perimeter into a rough semi-circle blistered with sandbagged emplacements and subsidiary earthworks.

The first thing I made out with any clarity were the Earthshakers; even at this distance they were impressive, dwarfing the inflatable habdomes that clustered around the compound like camouflaged mushrooms. As we got closer I made out batteries of Hydras too, carefully emplaced along the perimeter to maximise cover against air attack.

Despite myself I was favourably impressed; Colonel Mostrue obviously knew his business, and wasn't about to let the lack of a visible enemy lull him into a false sense of security. I began to look forward to meeting him.



'SO YOU'RE THE new commissar?' He glanced up from his desk, looking at me like something he'd found on the sole of his boot. I nodded, picking an expression of polite neutrality. I'd met his sort before, and my preferred option of breezy charm wouldn't cut it with him. Imperial Guard commanders

tended to distrust the political officers assigned to them; often with good reason. Most of the time, about all you could hope for was to develop a tolerable working relationship and try not to tread on one other's toes too much. That worked for me; even back then I realised commissars who threw their weight around tended to end up dying heroically for the Emperor, even if the enemy was a suspiciously long way away at the time.

'Ciaphas Cain.' I introduced myself with a formal nod of the head, and tried not to shiver. The air in the habdome was freezing, despite the furnace heat outside, and I found myself unexpectedly grateful for the greatcoat that went with my uniform. I should have anticipated Valhallan tastes would run to air conditioning which left your breath vapourising when you spoke. Mostrue was still in his shirtsleeves while I was trying my best not to shiver.

'I know who you are, commissar.' His voice was dry. 'What I want to know is what you're doing here?'

'I go where I'm sent, colonel.' Which was true enough, so far as it went. What I didn't mention was that I'd gone to considerable trouble finding an Administratum functionary with a weakness for cards and an inability to spot a stacked deck that almost amounted to a gift from the Emperor; who, after a few pleasant social evenings, had left me in a position to pick practically any unit in the entire Guard to attach myself to.

'We've never had a commissar assigned to us before.'

I tried on an expression of bemused puzzlement.

'Probably because you don't seem to need one. Your unit records are exemplary. I can only assume...' I hesitated just long enough to pique his interest.

'Assume what?'

I feigned ill-concealed embarrassment.

'If I could be frank for a moment, colonel?' He nodded. 'I was hardly the most diligent student at the schola. Too much time on the scrumball pitch, and not enough in the library, to be honest.' He nodded again. I thought it best not to

mention the other activities which had consumed most of the time I should have spent studying. 'My final assessment was marginal. I suspect this assignment was intended to... ease me into service without too many challenges.'

Worked like a charm, of course. Mostrue was flattered by the implication that his unit was sufficiently well-run to have attracted the favourable notice of the Commissariat, and, if not exactly pleased to have me aboard, was at least no longer radiating ill-concealed suspicion and resentment. It was also almost true; one of the reasons I'd settled on the 12th Field Artillery was that there didn't seem much for me to do there. The main one, though, was that artillery units fought from behind the lines. A long way behind. No skulking through jungles or city blocks waiting for a laser bolt in the back, no standing on the barricades face to face with a screaming ork horde, just the satisfaction of pulverising the enemy at a safe distance and a quick cup of recaff before doing it all over again. Suited me fine.

'We'll do our best to keep you underemployed.' Mostrue smiled thinly, a faint air of tolerant smugness washing across his features. I smiled too. If you let people feel superior to you, they're childishly easy to manipulate.



'GUNNER ERHLSSEN. Out of uniform on sentry duty.' Toren Divas, Mostrue's subaltern, glared at the latest miscreant, who had the grace to blush and glance at me nervously. Divas was the closest thing to a friend I'd made since I arrived; an amiable man, he'd been only too happy to hand over the chore of maintaining discipline among the troops to a proper commissar now one was available.

'Who isn't in this heat?' I made a show of reading the formal report, and glanced up. 'Nevertheless, despite the obvious extenuating circumstances, we have to

retain some standards. Five days' kitchen duty. And put some trousers on.'

Erhlsen saluted, visibly relieved to have escaped the flogging normally prescribed for such an infraction, and marched out between his escorts, showing far too much of his inadequately patched undershorts.

'I must say, Cai, you're not quite what I'd expected.' Erhlsen had been the last defaulter of the day, and Divas began to collect his documentation together. 'When they told us we were getting a commissar...'

'Everyone panicked. The card games broke up, the moonshine stills were dismantled, and the stores tallied with inventory for the first time in living memory.' I laughed, slipping easily into the affable persona I use to put people at their ease. 'We're not all Emperor-bothering killjoys, you know.'

The habdome rocked as the Earthshakers outside lived up to their name. After a month here, I barely noticed.

'You know your job better than I do, of course.' Divas hesitated. 'But don't you think you might be a little... Well...'

'Too lenient?' I shrugged. 'Possibly. But everyone's finding the heat hard to cope with. They deserve a bit of slack. It's good for morale.'

The truth was, of course, that despite what you've seen in the holos, charismatic commissars loved and respected by the men they lead are about as common as ork ballerinas; and being thought of as a soft touch who's infinitely preferable to any possible replacement is almost as good when it comes to making sure someone's watching your back in a firefight.

We stepped outside, the heat punching the breath from my lungs as usual, and were halfway to the officer's mess before a nagging sense of disquiet at the back of my mind resolved itself into a sudden realisation: the guns had stopped firing.

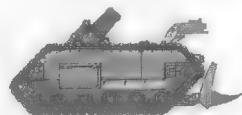
'I thought we were supposed to lay down a barrage for the rest of the day?' I said.

'We were.' Divas turned, looking at the Earthshakers. Sweat-streaked gun crews, stripped to the waist, were securing equipment, evidently more than happy to cease fire. 'Something's—'

'Sir! Commissar!' There was no need to look to identify the messenger; Jurgen's unique body odour heralding his arrival as surely as a shellscream presaged an explosion. He was running towards us from the direction of the battery offices. 'Colonel wants to see you right away!'

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Nothing, sir.' He sketched a perfunctory salute, more for Divas's benefit than mine, a huge grin all but bisecting his face. 'They're pulling us out!'



YES, IT'S TRUE.' Mostrue seemed as pleased at the news as everyone else. He pointed at the hololithic display. 'The 6th Armoured overran the last pocket of resistance this morning. They should have completed cleansing the entire world by nightfall.'

I studied it with interest, seeing the full dispersion of our units for the first time. The bulk of our forces in this hemisphere were well to the east, leaving a small, isolated blip between them and the mines. Us. The orks had fallen back further and faster than I'd expected, and I began to realise just how merited the Valhallans' reputation as elite shock troopers was; even fighting in conditions about as hostile to them as they were ever likely to encounter, they had ground a stubborn and vicious enemy to paste in a matter of weeks.

'So, where next?' I asked, regretting it instantly. Mostrue turned his pale eyes on me in the same way my old tutor domus used to do at the schola, when he was sure I was guilty of something but couldn't prove it. Which was most of the time, incidentally, but I digress.

'Initially, the landing field.' He turned to Divas. 'We'll need to get the Earthshakers limbered up for transport.'

'I'll see to it.' Divas hurried out.

'After that,' the colonel continued, changing the display, 'we're to join the Keffia task force.' A fleet of starships, over a thousand strong, was curving in towards the Desolatia system. I was impressed. News of the uprising on the remote agriworld was only just beginning to filter back to the Commissariat when I'd been dispatched here; the Navy had evidently been busy in the last three months.

'Seems a bit excessive for a handful of rebels,' one of the officers remarked.

'Let's hope so,' I said, seeing the chance of regaining the initiative. Mostrue looked at me again, in evident surprise; he'd obviously thought he'd put me in my place the first time for having the temerity to interrupt.

'Do you know something we don't, commissar?' He still pronounced my title as though it were a species of fungus, but at least he was pretending to acknowledge it. That was a start.

'Nothing concrete,' I said. 'But I have seen indications...'

'Other than the size of the fleet?' Mostrue's sarcasm got a toadying laugh from some of the officers as he turned away, convinced he'd called my bluff.

'It was only gossip really,' I began, letting him savour his phantom triumph for a moment longer, 'but according to a friend on the Warmaster's staff...'

The sudden silence was truly satisfying. That the 'friend' was a minor clerical functionary with a weakness for handsome young men in uniform, when she wasn't sorting files and making recaff, was a detail I kept to myself. I went on as though I hadn't noticed the sudden collective intake of breath.

'Keffia might have been infested by genestealers,' I finished.

The silence lengthened while they digested the implications. Everyone knew what that meant. A long, bloody campaign to cleanse the world metre by metre. Virus bombing from orbit was the option of last resort on an agriworld, which would cease to be of any value to the Imperium if its ecosystem was destroyed.

In other words, years of rear echelon campaigning in a temperate climate, chucking high explosive death at an enemy without any means to retaliate in kind. I could hardly wait.

'If this is true,' Mostrue said, looking more shaken than I'd ever seen him, 'we've no time to lose.' He began to issue orders to his subordinates.

'I agree,' I said. 'How close is the fleet?'

'A day, maybe two.' The colonel shrugged. 'The astropaths at regimental HQ lost contact with them last night.'

'With the entire fleet?' I was getting an uncomfortable tingling sensation in the palms of my hands. I've felt it a great many times over the years since, and it never meant anything good. No reason why an Imperial Guard officer should find the lack of contact ominous, of course, to them the warp and anything to do with it is simply something best not thought about, but commissars are supposed to know a great deal more than we'd like to about the primal stuff of Chaos. There's very little which can cast a shadow in the warp so powerful that it can cut off communication with an entire battle fleet, and none of them are anything I want to be within a dozen sub-sectors of. 'Colonel, I recommend very strongly that you rescind the orders you've just given.' He looked at me as if I'd gone mad.

'This is no time for humour, commissar.'

'I wish I was joking,' I said. Some of my unease must have been showing on my face, because he actually started listening to me. 'Put the whole battery on full alert. Especially the Hydras. Call regimental headquarters and tell them to do the same. Don't take no for an answer. And get every air defence auspex you can on line.'

'Anything else?' he asked, still visibly unsure whether to take me seriously or not.

'Yes,' I said. 'Pray to the Emperor I'm wrong.'



UNFORTUNATELY, I wasn't. I was in the command post, talking to the captain of an ore barge which had made orbit that morning, when my worst fears were realised. He was a florid man, running slightly to fat, and visibly uncomfortable communicating with an Imperial official, even one as minor as me.

'We're the only thing in orbit, commissar,' he said, clearly unsure why I'd asked. I flipped through the shipping schedules I'd requisitioned from an equally bemused mine manager.

'You weren't due for another week,' I said. The captain shrugged.

'We were lucky. The warp currents were stronger than usual.'

'Or something very big is disturbing them,' I suggested, then cursed myself for saying it. The captain wasn't stupid.

'Commissar?' he queried, clearly considering most of the possibilities I already had, and probably wondering if there was time to make a run for it.

'There's a large Navy task force inbound to pick us up,' I reassured him, half truthfully.

'I see.' He obviously didn't trust me further than he could throw a cargo shuttle, sensible man. He was about to say something else, when his navigator interrupted.

'We're detecting warp portals. Dozens of them!'

'The fleet?' Divas asked hopefully at my elbow. Mostrue shook his head doubtfully.

'The auspex signatures are all wrong. Not like ships at all...'

'Bioships,' I said. 'No metal in the hulls.'

'Tyranids?' Mostrue's face was grey. Mine was too, probably, although I'd had longer to get used to the idea. Like I said, there wasn't much that could cast a shadow in the warp that big, and with genestealers running rampant a couple of systems away it didn't need Inquisitor Kryptmann to join the dots. I turned my attention back to the freighter captain before he could cut the link.

'Captain,' I said hastily, 'your ship is now requisitioned by the Commissariat. You will not break orbit without explicit instructions. Do you understand?'

He nodded, somberly, and turned to shout orders at his crew.

'What do you want an ore scow for?' Mostrue looked at me narrowly. 'Planning to leave us, commissar?' That was precisely what I had in mind, of course, but I smiled thinly, pretending to take his remark for gallows humour.

'Don't think I'm not tempted,' I said. 'But I'm afraid we're stuck here.'

I called up the tactical display. Outside, the staccato drumbeats of the Hydras opened up, seeking the first mycetic spores to breach the atmosphere. Red dots began to blossom on the hololith, marking the first beachheads. To my relief and as I'd expected, the 'nids had homed in on the largest concentration of visible biomass: the main strength of the regiment. That would buy me a little time.

'Where did they come from?' Divas asked, an edge of panic entering his voice. I found myself slipping into my role of calm authority. All my training was beginning to pay off.

'One of the splinter fleets from Ichar IV.' The segmentum was full of them, fallout from the Ultramarines' heroic victory over Hive Fleet Kraken almost a decade before. Scattered remnants, a tiny fraction of the threat they'd once presented, but still enough to overwhelm a lightly defended world. Like this one. 'Small. Weak. Easy pickings.' I slapped him encouragingly on the back, radiating an easy confidence I didn't feel, and indicated the data coming in from the ore barge's navigational auspex. 'Less than a hundred ships.' Each one of which probably held enough bioconstructs to devour everyone on the planet, but I couldn't afford to think about that just now.

Mostrue was studying the display, nodding thoughtfully.

'That's why you wanted the barge. To see what's going on up there.' Most of the regimental sensor net had been directed downwards, towards the planet's surface. 'Good thinking.'

'Partially,' I said. I indicated the surface readouts. Our air defence assets were doing sterling work, but the sheer number of spores was unstoppable. Red contact

icons on the surface were beginning to make the hemisphere look like a case of Uhlren's pox. 'But we'll need it for an evacuation too.'

'Evacuate who?' The suspicious look was back on Mostrue's face again. I pointed to the mining colony.

'I'm sure you haven't forgotten we have a quarter of a million civilians sitting right next to the landing field,' I pointed out mildly. 'The 'nids haven't noticed them yet; thank the Emperor for underground hab zones.' Divas dipped his head at the mention of the Holy Name, pulling himself together with a visible effort. 'But when they do they'll think it's an all you can eat smorgasbord.'

'Will one barge be enough?' Divas asked.

'Have to be,' I said. 'It'll be cramped and uncomfortable for sure, but it beats ending up as Hormagaunt munchies. Can you get things started?'

'Right away.' Now he had something to do, Divas's confidence was returning. I clapped him on the back again as he turned to leave.

'Thanks, Toren. I know I can rely on you.' That should do it. The poor sap would take on a carnifex with a broken chair leg now rather than feel he'd let me down. Which just left Mostrue.

'We'll need to buy time,' I said, once the young subaltern was out of the way. The colonel looked at me, surprised by the change in my demeanour. But I knew my man; plain speaking would work better with him.

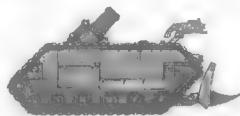
'The situation's worse than you were letting on, isn't it?' he asked. I nodded.

'I didn't want to discuss it in front of Divas. He's got enough to cope with at the moment. But yes.' I turned to the tactical display again. 'Even with every shuttle they can lay their hands on, it's going to take at least a day to get everyone aboard.' I indicated the main tyranid advance. 'At the moment the 'nids are here, engaging our main force. When they notice the colony...'

'Or overrun the regiment.' Mostrue could read a hololith as well as I could. I nodded.

'They'll head west. And when they do we'll have to hold them for as long as we can.' Until we're all dead, in other words. I didn't need to spell it out. Mostrue nodded, gravely. Small crystals of ice drifted down from the ceiling as the Earthshakers got back to work, abrading the odds against us by the most miniscule of fractions. To my surprise he held out his hand, grasping mine and shaking it firmly.

'You're a good man, commissar,' he said. Which just goes to show what an appalling judge of character he was.



NOW I'D SET everything in motion there was nothing to do but wait. I hung around the command post for a while longer, watching the red dots blossom in the desert to the east of us, and marvelled at the tenacity of our main force. I'd expected them to be annihilated within a matter of hours, but they held their positions doggedly, even gaining ground in a few places. Even so, with the steady rain of mycetic spores delivering an endless tide of reinforcements, they were only delaying the inevitable. Mostrue watched tensely, stepping aside to afford me a better view as he noticed my presence. Under other circumstances I'd have gloated quietly over my sudden popularity, but I was too busy trying to suppress the urge to run for the latrines.

'We've you to thank for this,' he said. 'Without your warning they'd have been all over us.'

'I'm sure you'd have coped,' I said, and turned to Divas. 'How's the evacuation coming?'

'Slowly,' he admitted. I made a show of studying the data, and smiled encouragingly.

'Faster than I'd expected,' I lied. But fast enough. If I was going to join them I couldn't wait too much longer. Divas looked pleased.

'Nothing more I can do here,' I said, turning back to Mostrue. 'This is a job for a real soldier.' I gave him a moment to

savour the compliment. 'I'll go and spend some time with the men. Try and boost morale.'

'It's what you're here for,' he said, meaning 'frak off and let me get on with it, then.' So I did.

Night had fallen some hours before, the temperature plummeting to levels the Valhallans were almost comfortable with, and the guardsmen seemed happier, despite the prospect of immanent combat. I wandered from group to group, cracking a few jokes, easing tension, instilling them with a confidence I was far from feeling myself. Despite my personal shortcomings, and I'd be the first to admit that they're many, I'm very good at that side of things. Which is why I was selected for the Commissariat in the first place.

Gradually, without seeming to have any specific destination in mind, I was heading for the vehicle park. I'd almost reached it when I ran out of time.

'They're here!' someone shrieked, opening up with a lasgun. I whirled at the distinctive crack of ionising air, in time to see a trooper I didn't recognise going down beneath a dark, nightmare shape which plummeted from the sky like a bird of prey. I didn't recognise him because his face was gone, eaten away by the fleshborer the thing carried.

'Gargoyles!' I shouted, although the warning could barely be heard above the unearthly shrieking which presaged a bioplasma attack. I leapt aside just quickly enough to avoid a seething bolt of primal matter vomited up by a winged horror swooping in my direction. I felt the heat on my face as it went past, detonating a few yards away and setting fire to a tent. Without thinking I drew my chainsword, thumbed the selector to full speed, and waved it over my head as I ducked. Luck was with me, because I was rewarded by a torrent of stinking filth which poured down the neck of my shirt.

'Look out, commissar!'

I whirled, seeing it swooping back towards me in the light from the fire, screaming in rage, ragged entrails streaming behind it like a banner. Erhlisen was kneeling, tracking it with the barrel of

his lasgun, leisurely as if he was at a recreational target shoot. I threw myself flat, just as he squeezed the trigger, and the thing's head exploded.

'Thanks, Erhlisen!' I waved, rolled to my feet, and drew my laspistol left-handed. He grinned, and turned to track another target.

Time to be somewhere else, I thought, and ran as hard as I could towards the vehicle park. On the way I shot frequently, and swung my humming chainsword in every defensive pattern I could recall, but whether I hit anything only the Emperor knows. Apparently I struck a heroic figure, though, shrieking what was taken for a stirring battle cry rather than an incoherent howl of terror, which encouraged the men no end.

The Hydras were firing continuously now, stitching the air over the compound with tracer fire which looked dense enough to walk on, but the gargoyles were small and fast moving, evading most of it with ease. Craning my neck around for potential threats I saw most of the guardsmen taking whatever cover they could find; anyone left out in the open was in no condition to move by this time as the fleshborer fire and bioplasma bolts rained down furiously. My attention thus diverted, I tripped, going down hard on something which swore at me, and tried to brain me with the butt of a lasgun.

'Jurgen! It's me!' I said, blocking frantically with my forearm before he could stave my skull in. Even over the smell of the gargoyle guts I could tell who it was without looking. He'd dug in between the tracks of a Salamander, protected from the blizzard of falling death by the armour plating above him.

'Commissar.' He looked relieved. 'What should we do?'

'Get this thing started,' I said. Anyone else might have argued, but Jurgen's dogged deference to authority sent him out into the open without hesitation. I half expected to hear a scream and the wet slap of a fleshborer impact, but after a moment the engine rumbled to life. I took a deep breath, and then another. Relinquishing

the safety of overshadowing armour plate for the exposed deck of the open-topped scout car seemed almost suicidal; but staying here for the main assault would be worse.

With more willpower than I believed I possessed I holstered the pistol, tightened my grip on the chainsword, and rolled out into the open.

'Up here, sir' Jurgen reached down a grubby hand, which I seized gratefully, and swung myself up behind the autocannon. Something crunched under my bootsoles: tiny beetle-like things, thousands of them, discharged by the gargoyles' fleshborers. I shuddered reflexively, but they were dead, not having found living flesh to consume in their brief spasm of existence.

'Drive!' I shouted, and was almost thrown off my feet as Jurgen accelerated. I ducked below the gunner's shield, dropped the melee weapon, and opened fire. It had little effect, of course, but it would look good, and anyone seeing us would assume that the extra firepower was the reason I'd commandeered the vehicle.

Within moments we were beyond the camp perimeter, and Jurgen began to slow.

'Keep going!' I said. He looked puzzled, but opened the throttle again.

'Where to, sir?'

'West. The mines. As fast as you can.' Again, I was expecting questions, doubts, and from any other trooper I might have had them. But Jurgen, Emperor bless his memory, simply complied without demur. Then again, in his position I'd have done the same, relieved to have been ordered away from the battle. Gradually the noise and fireglow began to fade behind us in the night. I was just beginning to relax, estimating the time remaining until we reached safety, when the Salamander shook violently.

'Jurgen!' I yelled. 'What's happening?'

'They're firing at us, sir.' He sounded no more concerned about it than he did about making his regular report as latrine orderly. It took me a moment to realise that he trusted me to deal with whatever we were facing. I pulled myself up to look

over the gunner's shield, and my bowels spasmed.

'Turn!' I screamed, as a second venom cannon blast scored the armour plating centimetres from my face. 'Back to the compound!'

Even now, after more than a century, I still wake sweating from dreams of that moment. In the pre-dawn glow the plain before us seemed to move like a vast grey ocean, undulating gently; but instead of water it was a sea of chitin, flecked with claw and fang rather than foam, rolling inexorably on towards the fragile defensive island of the artillery park. I would have wept with disappointment if I wasn't already too terrified for any other emotion. The 'nids had outsmarted me, sweeping round to cut us off and block our escape.

I bounced off the hull plating, falling heavily back into the crew compartment, as Jurgen threw one of the tracks into reverse and swung us around, practically on a coin. My head cracked painfully against something hard. I blinked my swimming eyes clear, and recognised it as a voxcaster. Something like hope flared again, and I grabbed the microphone.

'Cain to command! Come in!' I screamed, voice raw with panic. Static hissed for a moment.

'Commissar? Where are you?' Mostrue's voice, calm and confident. 'We've been looking for you since we drove off the attack...'

'It was a diversion!' I yelled. 'The main force is coming from the west! If you don't redeploy the guns we're all dead!'

'Are you sure?' The colonel sounded doubtful.

'I'm out here now! I've got half the hive fleet on my arse! How sure do you want me to be?' I never found out, as the aerial melted under the impact of a bioplasma blast. The Salamander shook again, and the engine howled, as Jurgen pushed it up past speeds it had never been designed to cope with. Despite my trepidation I couldn't resist peering cautiously over the lip of the armour plate.

Merciful Emperor, we were opening the distance! The incoming fire was becoming less accurate as the scuttling swarm receded slowly behind us. Emboldened, I swung the pintel-mounted bolter around and fired into the densely packed mass of seething obscenity; there was no need to aim, as I could hardly miss hitting something, but I pointed it in the general direction of the largest creature I saw. As a rule, the larger the creature the higher it was in the hive hierarchy, and the more vital it was to coordinating the swarm. And seeding swarms, I vaguely recalled from some long-forgotten xenobiology lecture, tended to be thinly supplied with them. I missed the tyrant I'd spotted but one of its guard warriors went down, mashed instantly to goo by the weight of the swarm scuttling on and over it.

The compound was in sight now, ant-like troopers lining the fortifications, and, Emperor be praised, the Hydras rumbling into position to defend them, their quad-barrelled autocannon turrets depressing to face the oncoming tide of death. I was just beginning to think we might make it—

When, with a loud crack and a shriek of tortured metal, our howling engine fell silent. Jurgen had pushed it too far and we were about to pay for that with our lives. The Salamander lurched, slipping sideways, and slewed to a halt in a spray of sand.

'What do we do now, sir?' Jurgen asked, hauling himself up out of the driver's compartment. I grabbed my chainsword, suppressing the urge to use it on him; he could still be useful.

'Run like frak!' I said, demonstrating the point. I didn't have to be faster than the 'nids, just faster than Jurgen. I could hear his boots scuffing in the sand behind me, but didn't turn; that would have slowed me momentarily, and I really didn't want to see how close the swarm was getting.

The Hydras opened up, shooting past us, gouging holes in the onrushing wall of chittering death, but barely slowing it. Lasgun bolts began following suit;

although the small arms fire would only be marginally effective at this range, every little helped. Return fire from the warriors was sporadic, and directed at the defenders behind the barricades rather than us, the hive mind apparently deciding we weren't worth the bother of singling out. Suited me fine.

I was almost at the berms, encouraging shouts from the men in the emplacements ringing in my ears, when I heard a cry from behind me. Jurgen had fallen.

'Commissar! Help!'

Not a chance, I thought, intent on reaching the safety of the barricades, then my heart froze. Ahead of me, angling in to cut us off, was the huge, unmistakable bulk of the hive tyrant, accompanied by its attendant bodyguards. It hissed, opening its jaws, and I dived to one side expecting the familiar blast of bioplasma, but instead a ravening blast of pure energy detonated where I'd stood seconds before, throwing me to the ground. I rolled upright, moving as far away from it as I could, and found myself running back towards Jurgen. He was on the ground, a hormagaunt about to disembowel him with its scything claws, and its brood mates lining up to dice what was left. Caught between the 'gaunts and the hive tyrant the choice was clear; I had an outside chance of fighting my way through the swarm of smaller creatures, but going back would mean certain death.

'Back off!' I screamed, and swung my chainsword at the 'gaunt attacking Jurgen. It just had time to look up in surprise before its head came off, spraying ichor which smelled nearly as bad as Jurgen did. He rolled to his feet, snapping off a shot from his lasgun that exploded the thorax of another, which I'd barely had time to register was about to eviscerate me. Looked like we were even. I glanced around. The rest of the brood were hemming us in, and the tyrant was getting closer, looming huge against a sky reddened by the rising sun.

Then suddenly the tyrant wasn't there, replaced by shreds of steaming flesh which fell almost leisurely to the sand, its attendant warriors exploding around it. One of the Hydras had rolled around the edge of its emplacement to get a clear shot, the hail of autocannon rounds taking the entire group apart at almost point blank range.

I swung the chainsword to block a sweeping scythe from the closest 'gaunt, and missed as it abruptly pulled away. The whole swarm was hesitating, milling uncertainly, deprived of its guiding intelligence.

'Fire! Keep firing!' Mostrue's voice rang out, clear and confident from the barricades. The gunners complied enthusiastically. I swung the chainsword again, fear and desperation lending me superhuman strength, carving my way through the 'gaunts like so many sides of Grox.

Abruptly the swarm broke, scattering, scuttling away like frightened rodents. I dropped the chainsword, trembling with reaction, and felt my knees give way.

'We did it! We did it!' Jurgen let his lasgun fall, his voice tinged with wonder. 'Emperor be praised.' I felt a supporting arm go round my shoulders.

'Well done, Cain. Bravest thing I've ever seen.' Divas was holding me up, his face alight with something approaching hero worship. 'When you went back for Jurgen I thought you were dead for sure.'

'You'd have done the same,' I said, realising the smart way to play it was modest and unassuming. 'Is he-?'

'He's fine.' Colonel Mostrue joined us, and looked at me with the old tutor domus expression. 'I'd like to know what you were doing out there, though.'

'Something didn't feel right about the gargoyle assault,' I improvised hastily. 'And I remembered tyranids tend to use flanking attacks against dug-in defenders. So I thought I'd better go out and take a look.'

'Thank the Emperor you did,' Divas put in, swallowing every word.

'You could have assigned someone,' Mostrue pointed out.

'It was dangerous,' I said, knowing we'd be overheard. 'And, let's be honest colonel, I'm the most expendable officer in the battery.'

'No one in my battery's expendable, commissar. Not even you.' For a moment I saw a flicker of amusement in those ice-blue eyes and shivered. 'But I'll remember your eagerness to volunteer for dangerous assignments in future.'

I'll just bet you will, I thought. And he was as good as his word, too, once we got to Keffia. But in the meantime he had one more favour to do me.



I'VE BEEN thinking, commissar.' Mostrue glanced up from the hololith, where the image of our newly-arrived fleet was enjoying a rare turkey shoot against the vastly outnumbered bioships. 'Perhaps I should assign you an aide?'


'That's hardly necessary, colonel,' I said, flattered in spite of myself. 'My workload's far from excessive.' That wasn't the point, though, and we both knew it. My status as a hero of the regiment demanded some recognition, and assigning a trooper as my personal flunkey would be a public sign that I was fully accepted by the senior officers.

'Nevertheless.' Mostrue smiled thinly. 'There was no shortage of volunteers, as you can imagine.' That went without saying. The official version of my heroism, and my self-sacrificing rescue of Jurgen, was all over the compound.

'I'm sure you'll make the right choice,' I said.

'I already have.' Suspicion flared, and I felt the pit of my stomach drop. He wouldn't, surely...

My nose told me that he had, even before I turned, forcing a smile to my face.

'Gunner Jurgen,' I said. 'What a pleasant surprise.' 



THE PATH OF WARRIORS

by Neil McIntosh

A CHILL WIND drove in across the sea, churning the water into great crests, steel grey flecked with white. A storm was coming. Change was coming. A finger of cold, plucked from the sea, entered the boy's heart and pierced it like a dagger. Change was coming, and things would never be the same again.

Stefan looked up towards his father, standing like a statue at his side. His father did not return his glance, but kept his stare fixed beyond the raging waters, out towards the far horizon where the sun was a deep orange globe sinking into the sea. Fedor Kumansky was waiting. Waiting for the change.

Questions formed upon the boy's lips and faded away, unspoken. A feeling, one that he barely yet knew as fear, was growing inside him. On either side of them, the huge sugar-ice cliffs that marked the shores of Mother Kislev stretched away into the distance. Before them, the boundless ocean besieged the shore.

They were standing on the edge of the world. It was the world Stefan had known all of his life, but this unknowing fear that swelled like the sea in the pit of his stomach was something that he had not felt before in all his eleven years.

He tightened his grip upon his father's hand, pinching with his fingernails until they bit deep into the tough, leathery skin until, at last, his father looked down at him. Fedor Kumansky smiled for his son, and Stefan saw that the smile was a mask.

'What is going to happen, father?'

By way of answer, Fedor Kumansky extended an arm out to sea. There, where moments before there had been only the jagged line separating sky and ocean, tiny black specks now peppered the horizon.

The ships were too far distant for Stefan to make them out, but it was a common enough sight. Here, where the mighty Sea

of Claws funnelled down into the estuary that became the River Lynsk, the traffic of ships was ceaseless. Fishermen, traders, merchants ferrying their wares to and from the great city of Erengard and beyond. Stefan found the sight of the ships almost comforting. Except that the tiny masted vessels gathering on the horizon seemed to be multiplying by the moment. There were too many of them.

'So many ships,' Stefan said, quietly. 'Perhaps they have sailed all the way from Marienburg, or even from L'Anguille, to trade with us?'

His father shook his head, slowly, and in that movement Stefan knew that the small branch of comfort he clung to was gone.

'I have waited for sight of these ships,' his father said. 'Waited, through waking hours and times of sleep. Waited in the hope that they would never come. But last night the gods spoke to me through my dreams. They told me of the dark clouds about to gather.' He drew his son to him.

'No,' Fedor said at last. 'I don't think they come from Marienburg, nor from L'Anguille or anywhere to the west.' He drew his cloak tighter round him to fend off the biting cold of the wind. 'I think they come from the north. And I fear they have no wish to trade with us.'

North. Stefan turned the word over in his mind. North was not a place; he had never seen the north nor met any man or woman from his village who had been there. But he had heard of 'north', and knew it as the thing that had seeded the fear that turned his stomach. North was the savage lands of Norsca, or worse; the savage, nameless lands whose ships set sail upon the seas of his dreams, his nightmares.

The salt air stung Stefan's face and tears prickled in the corners of his eyes. He looked to his father for some sign of what he was feeling, but Fedor's face was blank. The time of his waiting was over. The dark shapes were more numerous now, and larger. Stefan could make out the outline of the sails billowing full-blown upon tall masts. Fedor Kumansky laid his arm gently across his son's shoulders, and turned him away from the sea.

'The time has come,' he told Stefan, softly. 'And we have work to do.'

Father and son retraced their steps upon the flint path that led from the cliffs back towards their village, into the heart of Odensk. Their pace was brisk but not hurried; a good sort of pace for a crisp, cold day at the beginning of spring. Stefan sensed no panic in his father's measured strides across the headland, but at each timbered house along the path into the village Fedor stopped, and rapped hard upon the door with his staff.

Calm, sombre faces appeared in doorways. Strong, upright men with proud, weather-beaten faces much like his father's. Fedor clasped each one of them by the hand, but this was not a time for greetings. To each of his kinsmen, the same words, clear, spoken almost without emotion: 'The time has come.'

Where there had been one man and his son soon there were a hundred, moving through the streets of Odensk, the same message passing from mouth to mouth. Each repetition met with the same response. Knives that had only seen service gutting fish were cleaned ready for a grimmer purpose. Broadwords tarnished with the rust of peaceful years were brought down and polished with oil. Staffs became clubs in the hands of men who had spent their lives at peace. And from out of an underground store, long-disused and fastened with padlocks, two small cannons were removed and wheeled slowly towards the cove where the seas broke hard upon the shore.

The sleepy afternoon quiet of the fishing port had been broken, the people roused to a level and kind of activity that Stefan had never seen before. Half running at his father's side, he watched as the village

transformed itself into something new, something frightening. Tools of life turned to weapons of war; men hardened by work stood ready to become warriors. Homesteads became fortresses.

By the time Stefan and his father reached the low thatched building that was their own home, the sun had gone and a chill twilight was settling over Odensk. Stefan tried to imagine the fleet of ships as they closed upon the coast; tried to imagine the construction of the masts, the shape and position of the sails; tried to picture the faces of the men, on deck or climbing in the rigging, hoping that somehow they looked no different to his father and the men of Odensk. Most of all he tried to imagine the ships turning away before they entered the mouth of the cove, hoping against hope that their intentions were not, after all, warlike.

But in his young heart he knew that there was no hope. His father's expression, and the calm, repeated mantra at each door along the way told him that. The time had come, and there would be no returning.

Mikhal was still in the salting sheds, helping the women clean and gut the fish ready for market. He looked up expectantly as he saw his father enter. Stefan ran to his younger brother and embraced him, hugging his body tight against his own.

Their father moved to the centre of the long room and called for quiet.

'The time for work is over now,' he said. 'All of you go home. And may the gods watch over us all.' There was a moment of silence, and then the women began to collect together their bundles of food and belongings. A few celebrated the working day ending prematurely, others looked curious or suspicious. The elder women amongst them stayed quiet, but gathered their things together and left as quickly as they could.

Fedor Kumansky led the two boys across the courtyard to the house. He turned down the wick on the single oil lamp until the room was lit only by a faint amber glow. Then he drew the heavy curtain across the narrow window, closing out the last of the fading twilight. The

embers of a fire still burned low in the hearth, and the room was suffused with a smoky warmth. For a moment Stefan felt safe again, comforted by this familiar world.

'Listen to me.' Fedor gripped him tightly by the shoulders. 'Soon I must leave you. You and Mikhal must stay here, where you will be safe. After I've gone you will lock all of the doors and bar the shutters across the windows. Open them to no one, no one, until I get back. And whatever happens, Stefan, you must look after your brother. You understand that?'

Stefan nodded. He understood, and he did not understand. He understood that his childhood was ending, understood that the time of his being a man was beginning. Understood that he was Mikhal's protector now, no longer his playmate. But he did not understand why. He took his brother's hand.

'But you will return, father, won't you?'

Fedor bent down and removed the silver chain from around his neck. He showed the boys the locket he held in his hand, an oval tablet inscribed with the likeness of Shallya, the Goddess of Healing.

'This was your mother's,' he told the boys. 'She gave it to me just before she died. It became my pledge to her that I would always care for you, our sons.' Stefan touched the locket, and a picture of his mother, faint in his memory, came back to him. He pressed the silver tablet into his brother's palm.

'It feels cold,' said Mikhal.

'I'm giving this to you now,' Fedor told Stefan. 'Keep it safe for me, just as I will keep my pledge to your mother.'

'Why do you have to go?' Mikhal asked. Tears ran down his cheeks, and he was shivering despite the warmth from the fire. Stefan drew a protective arm around his brother, as his father had so often done with him.

'The time has come for me to fight,' Fedor said. His voice was grave but calm, and Stefan suddenly realised that his father had been preparing for this night for a very long time. He hugged Mikhal tightly but his shivering would not stop.

'Why do you have to fight?' he implored. 'Stay here with us!'

'Bad people are coming,' their father said. 'And we must fight them, or they will destroy us.' He smiled, trying to soften the message in his words. Standing in the yellow glow of the oil lamp he looked very tall, very strong. It seemed inconceivable that anyone, or anything, could defeat him. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We're ready for them.'

Stefan's mouth felt dry and tight as he spoke. 'We can fight too,' he said. 'We can fight by your side.'

His father shook his head. 'No, you must show your bravery by staying here. And staying safe. Look after your little brother. That is your duty now.'

Stefan looked down at the icon of the goddess, and twisted the braided silver chain around his fingers.

'I'll keep us safe until you return,' he said at last.

His father bent and placed a kiss on the forehead of each son. 'Keep faith in the goddess. She'll watch over you always.'

Fedor Kumansky unlocked a cupboard by the side of the hearth and reached inside. Stefan looked in awe at the sword in its scabbard fastened to the stiff leather harness. Fedor drew the harness around his waist and secured it tightly. Then he took two short daggers from the cupboard, and stuck one inside his belt. He hesitated, turning the second knife over in his hands, then laid it upon the table in front of the boys, and nodded.

'Stefan, my cloak,' he said gently.

Mikhal had stopped shivering now. Either that, or Stefan was holding him so tightly that he could no longer shiver. Both boys were transfixed by the sight of their father with the sword. Their father, the warrior.

'Are the bad ones going to come into the village?' Mikhal asked.

'No,' his father said. 'We're going to stop them before they get that far'

Stefan could feel his heart beating faster and faster. The sick fear in his stomach had returned. 'But,' he said, 'you'll come back for us, you promise?'

Fedor Kumansky paused, one hand outstretched towards the heavy oak door, the other held out to his children. His gaze was fixed upon the ground, but at last he looked up and met Stefan's eye.

'Keep your brother safe,' he said. 'I'll come back. I promise.'

Stefan felt something inside him about to burst. He wanted to sob, to cling to his father, stop him leaving the house. Then they would all be safe. But he knew that was not possible. Another Stefan was starting to emerge from the child that had woken that morning, a Stefan who knew that could not be. But still he needed something, some words of reassurance from his father that he could cling to.

'Father,' he said. Fedor Kumansky had the door half-open. He turned and looked back sadly at his sons.

'Is this how things must be now?' Stefan asked. 'Will it always be like this, forever?'

'No,' his father said, quietly. 'Nothing lasts forever.'



FEDOR WAS ONE of the last to arrive at the cove. The beachhead was in total darkness, but from the voices audible above the roar of the waves, Fedor knew that the men from the village were there in force. As he drew closer, bodies and faces became visible. They must have numbered nearly a hundred, men armed with swords, knives, staves, anything that would deliver a blow. At each end of the bay, the two cannons sat primed and ready to fire. Set against the enormity of the ocean, they looked puny and useless.

Fedor scanned the faces of the men around him. He had known many of them since he himself had been a child. Daily they risked their lives together on the ocean, trawling for fish with their nets, pitting their strength against the cruel power of the Sea of Claws. These were brave men all, Fedor knew. His trust of them was no less than the trust they placed in him. For a moment his heart lifted; they might yet prevail.

The gathering storm that he watched from the cliff-tops that afternoon had not abated. The sea boiled in great plumes around the rocks and crashed down upon the shore. Only a fool would contemplate landing a boat in weather like this. A fool, or a madman. He looked around at his kinsmen, and guessed many of them had the same idea. Perhaps the storm would save them.

He joined a group of villagers who were studying the sea with a spyglass.

'How many ships?' he asked them.

Jan Scherensky lowered the glass and handed it to Fedor. 'A dozen, maybe more,' he replied. 'Not all are bearing lights, so it's hard to be sure.'

Fedor took the glass and looked out into the channel. A spread of lights bobbed up and down upon the water line, sometimes dipping below the towering waves, but moving ever closer to shore. It might almost have been the fishing fleet, returning to port after the long night at sea. But these were no honest fishermen.

'Well,' he said at last. 'They're headed in towards the mouth of the estuary, that's for sure.'

Heads around him nodded solemnly. The older ones amongst them remembered the last time, when the Reavers had visited bloody slaughter upon their homes. Maybe this time it wasn't the Reavers, but one thing was certain: few travelled this way from the north in friendship or for trade.

'They'll be headed up river,' Jakob Kolb muttered. 'Maybe they even fancy a crack at Erengard itself.'

Fedor nodded. It was possible. History had it that raiders had got that far before. 'The question is,' he said, 'whether they've a mind to stop off here first.' He knew in his own mind what the answer to that question was.

Andrei Markarov took the glass from Fedor and put it to his eye. He was a young man, well over six foot tall, and one of the strongest in the village. And yet Fedor marked the fear in his eyes as he took the glass. A young wife and three small children at home. Fedor knew exactly where that fear came from.

'All the lights in the village are doused,' Andrei said. 'Maybe they won't even know we're here.'

'Maybe,' Jakob agreed. 'And maybe not.'

'At any rate,' Jan Scherensky added, 'it would be madness to try and land their boats in this storm.'

Madness indeed, Fedor thought. He fell to wondering what form that madness might take. Very soon, one way or another, they would find out.

Within a matter of minutes, the dark shapes of the ships themselves were visible through the gloom, and voices from the men on deck were drifting in to shore. Fedor motioned his men back to take cover behind the shelter of the rocks lining the bay. Nothing must give their presence away; they must stay silent as the grave, and wait.

Jakob Kolb crouched down behind a crag of rock beside his friend. 'Small ships,' he observed. 'Small enough to navigate the channels of the Lynsk.'

Fedor nodded. 'And big enough to cause us plenty of trouble. How many do you make now?'

Jakob raised the glass above the rim of rock. 'Fourteen,' he said at last. 'Men on deck of most of them. High in the water; no cargo aboard. They mean to carry back more than they bring.'

Fedor felt the muscles in his stomach tighten. 'Pray to the gods they keep going,' he said, then added: 'Gods forgive me that I should wish misfortune on others.'

The wind suddenly dropped, smoothing the waves. Far above them, the moon Mannslieb emerged from behind the clouds. Silver light washed over the bay, picking out the black fleet in the water below.

The lead ship reached the entrance to the bay, then tacked away from the beachhead towards the mouth of the Lynsk. The second and third ships in the convoy made to follow. Fedor's heart gave a leap; he shook Jacob's arm in early celebration. 'Keep sailing,' he muttered, 'keep sailing.'

Then a voice nearby said: 'Oh no!'

The fourth boat was turning in mid-stream, back towards the shallows of the bay.

'Not this way,' Fedor found himself whispering. 'Not this way, not this way.'

Shouts broke out amongst the men on the fourth boat. Moments later, a burning flare, flew up from the deck of the ship, lighting the night sky a vivid scarlet.

'What have they seen?' someone shouted. 'Why are they stopping?'

Fedor watched the leading vessels sway and churn in the water. He knew that could mean only one thing: they were turning around.

A second and third flare spiralled skywards. Now every one of the ships in the fleet seemed to be ablaze with lights. Voices screamed commands in a language that bore no resemblance to any tongue of man that Fedor had heard before.

Several splashes in the water, almost simultaneously. They're dropping anchor, he realised. He lifted the glass to his eyes once more and saw the rowing boats being lowered into the water from the decks of at least three of the ships.

Fedor Kumansky rose from behind the rock and drew himself up to his full height. His throat felt parched and tight; his voice, when he spoke seemed small and insignificant, but he forced it out, summoning all the power he could muster to carry his commands above the sounds of the invaders closing on the shore.

'Aim the cannon!' he shouted. 'Be ready to fight for your lives.'



FOR A LONG time after their father had gone, there had been only silence. The two boys sat cross-legged by the fire, the only other light the dim glow of the oil-lamp which they had been forbidden to turn any higher. To distract his younger brother from his fears, Stefan had told stories: imaginary tales of the lands beyond Kislev; the princes of Bretonnia, of the magicians that wove their spells across the vast lands of the

Empire. And he told Mikhal of the brave warriors of Kislev, the strong, upright men like their own father, men who would never be defeated, not by any foe.

The light from the lamp guttered and died. The only light and warmth in the room now came from the embers in the hearth.

'It's dark,' Mikhal protested. 'Light a candle, Stefan.'

'We mustn't,' Stefan said, firmly. 'Not until father's back. We have to wait.'

'How long?' Mikhal demanded. Stefan made no reply; he wanted the question answered too, and suddenly he wished he had a big brother of his own to protect him and answer his questions. Most of all, like Mikhal, he wished their father would return.

He crept to the window and levered open the shutter far enough to allow him to peer out into the night. It was a sight he had never seen before: the village in total darkness. Not a single light burned in any of the windows of the houses spread around the edge of the square. The streets were empty, the temple bells stilled. Even the birds that settled after dark in the trees beyond the house had fallen silent.

For a moment the thought leapt into Stefan's mind that they had been abandoned, that he and Mikhal were the only ones left in the whole village of Odensk. But that was stupid, just a child's imagination. There must be others, people in every one of the houses, perhaps even now looking out from their windows, like him. In the dark he just couldn't see them, that was all.

But suddenly the darkness was no longer total. At the very far end of the street, along the path that led down to the bay, he could see the orange flicker of a lamp or torch being carried up the hill. The silence was no longer total either; Stefan could hear voices following behind the light, though he couldn't yet make out any of the words. A surge of excitement filled Stefan's body. He closed his eyes and made a wish, wished that the news was good, that, in a few moments, the door would be flung open and their father would be standing on the step in front of

them, his arms spread as wide as the grin upon his face.

'Mikhal,' Stefan called to his brother, remembering moments later he had promised to keep his voice low. 'Mikhal,' he repeated in a whisper. 'Come here and see.'

Mikhal joined his brother at the window, elbowing Stefan aside to get a better view. The single lamp had become a procession, the voices swollen to the sound of a large crowd. The air rang with the clatter of footsteps, marching up the hill that led towards the centre of the village.

A wave of relief rushed over Stefan. It was over. His father and the others were coming back. He reached up to unfasten the window, ready to call out to his father as he spied him approaching the house.

His hand fastened upon the latch and then froze. Maybe it was the sound of heavy boots upon the cobble stone – too loud, or too many. Or maybe it was something in the building cacophony of voices, voices singing songs his childhood had never taught him, in a tongue he still could not recognise. Without thinking, Stefan found himself reaching out towards Mikhal, but his younger brother had slipped away from the window.

He turned and saw Mikhal tugging hard upon the door.

'I'm going outside!' Mikhal shouted. 'Find father!'

'No!' The intensity in Stefan's voice frightened them both. But the bolts were already drawn back; the door was open.



FEDOR KUMANSKY gazed at the bloody carnage all around him and wept. The men of Odensk had been prepared. They were strong, and though they had lived for peace, they were ready to fight fearlessly to protect their homesteads. It had made no difference.

He brushed away tears with a hand stained red with blood whilst he rested upon his sword to draw precious breath. All around, his brothers of the sea lay dead

or dying, slaughtered by creatures driven by a single purpose; to destroy every living thing that lay in their path.

At first, the battle had gone well. The invaders hadn't seen Fedor's men lying in wait behind the rocks, and each of the cannons had found their mark. The two boats that had been lowered from the ships at anchor were destroyed, the men inside killed or thrown into the heavy swell of the sea.

But even as the first boats sank, three more were in the water, then five, then six. Within minutes the mouth of the bay was clogged with oared vessels being rowed hard towards the shoreline.

The cannons were reloaded and fired a second, a third time, but the men of Odensk might as well have tried to hold back the tide itself. The invaders made no attempt to rescue those who had been pitched into the water. They were left to die as the next wave of boats ploughed onwards, relentless.

Fedor drew the sword from its scabbard and held it high above his head. Moonlight glinted off the newly-polished steel.

'Rise up!' he called to his men. 'We'll send them back wherever they've sailed from, and make them rue they ever made the voyage south!'

Cheers rang out from the rocks around and behind him. Men emerged in their dozens, no longer fishermen, but warriors. Andrei Markarov appeared at his side, his face flushed and excited. 'Don't worry,' he told Fedor. 'We're all ready for this.'

'I know,' Fedor replied quietly. 'I know we are.'

Andrei turned and urged his comrades forward. 'Come on!' he yelled, stabbing down at the beach with his sword. 'This barren strip of land will be their first and last taste of Mother Kislev! Let us make them pay dearly for each yard!'

The leading boats had run aground in the shallows of the bay. Now the men of Odensk would come face to face with those who would take their land, their living, their lives.

As one the villagers rose up to form a human shield. Together they would drive the invaders back into the sea, and the waters would run red with their blood.

Figures were in the water, ploughing through the waves towards the beach. Fedor tried to take stock of their numbers and quickly lost count. Tens, dozens, it might be hundreds. The air around him sang with the sound of arrows being loosed, as all those nearby who carried bows launched the next attack into the swirling waters of the bay. Fedor saw several of the advancing figures stumble and fall beneath the onslaught. Countless other arrows found their mark, but seemingly made no impact. The invaders strode on through the waters oblivious to the arrow shafts lodged in their flesh, or tore out the wooden shafts from their bodies and tossed them aside as if they were no more than irritations.

Any hope that the invaders could be forced back before they had got as far as the beach died there and then. Fedor Kumansky said his prayers to the gods and stepped forward towards the water's edge. He thought about the life he was about to set behind him, a hard life of peaceful struggle and simple reward. He thought about his wife, lain six years in the cold ground. And he thought about his sons, Stefan and Mikhal, waiting on his safe return at home. He begged the Goddess Shallya for her vigilance in protecting them.

He looked into the faces of his attackers. Surely they, too, must be men like he, men with homes and loved ones that they longed to see again. Surely some sense could still intervene before the madness engulfed them all.

But Fedor Kumansky saw nothing of the kind. The faces that stared back at him had long ago been leached of any vestige of humanity as he understood it. In fact, he was not certain if many of them were human at all. Most wore the coarse fur jerkins and horned steel caps of the Norse hordes, but on some the marks of mutation were clear. Stretched jaws gaped open to display rows of yellowed rodents teeth. Horns grown out of bone jutted through ruptured faces and foreheads. Skin sparkled with the chill lustre of the

serpent's scales. But one thing they had in common, every one: their eyes, vacant, almost unseeing, empty of compassion. They offered him no hope, no respite. This would be unto death.

The opposing forces met where surf crashed upon the shore. Fedor stood at the edge of his world, and cast a last glance inland towards the village. The invaders were shouting orders at each other in a harsh, guttural tongue, their rough voices obliterating even the sounds of the waves. Tall figures dressed in dark, foul-smelling skins were advancing on him on three sides. Fedor picked a target at random, and attacked.

As he ran towards the thick-set figure he had marked out, it struck Fedor Kumansky that he had not fought another being for more than six years. His opponent turned towards him almost in slow-motion, and he aimed his first blow. There was a moment that seemed to last forever as Fedor looked at the man; his milk-white face and fair hair poking out from beneath the rounded iron cap upon his head; the small scars pocking the baby-smooth skin on his face. The sly, hungry grin that spread over his features as he met Fedor's eyes.

Fedor swung his sword, and felt it judder as it struck home, cutting through leather, cloth, or bone – he couldn't tell. His opponent tottered as though slightly drunk, but did not fall. Fedor saw the man's sword arm swinging up towards him. All of a sudden, Fedor found himself possessed by a furious frenzy. He pulled back his sword, parried the blow aimed towards him then struck again and again, hacking at the other's man's body as he might cleave meat from a bone. Blood sprayed out of a deep cut through the man's neck as, finally, he toppled into the shallow water lapping the beach.

Fedor experienced a moment of pure horror, looking down upon a scene from the very pit of Morr. Then he felt something cut through the cloth of his shirt, cold metal grazing the skin below his ribs. He spun round to find a huge figure bearing down on him, knives in both of its hands, the same insane, blind bloodlust in its eyes. Fedor took his sword in both

hands, stepped back and swung a blow directly into the Norse's face, the blade paring flesh away from bone.

He wasn't seeing men, or even mutants, any longer. Fedor Kumansky's existence had become distilled into one simple equation: kill or be killed. And he went about that business with every ounce of his being.

But, even as he fought, Fedor was aware that they were being pushed back up the beach, on to the path that would lead eventually to the village. He saw Jacob Kolb on his knees, trying to fend off the blows raining down upon him from a Norscan wielding a fierce-looking, double-headed axe. Fedor cut a path through the battleground with his sword, his desperation to reach his friend endowing him with the strength of two men. He lunged with his sword, slicing through a Norse arm, severing it above the elbow.

'Get up, old friend! Get up!' He lifted Jakob's face towards his own and wiped away the filth crusting his friend's face. But Jakob was already dead, he had seen the last light of this world. Fedor had barely a moment to mark his grief before something landed heavily upon his back, sending him sprawling face-down. Long fingers ending in sharpened talons fastened a grip around his neck. Fedor felt as though the very life was being squeezed from him. Then, just as suddenly, the pressure eased and the weight was lifted off his back. Fedor turned to see Andrei freeing his sword from the mutant's body with the help of his boot. Andrei's face was caked with blood. He stretched out a hand and helped Fedor to his feet.

All around him Fedor saw the dead and the dying. Friends, brothers he had toiled with very working day of his life. Men who would not be beaten by anything had given their all, given their lives. And it was not enough.

'We must re-group,' Fedor said, fighting for his breath. 'Pull back to the village. They'll destroy us out here.'

'But—'

‘No buts, Andrei. This is not glory. This is survival. Survival of our loved ones. Gather whoever you can. We pull back, to the village. We must defend our homes.’



STEFAN'S HEART pounded hard inside his chest. Mikhal had either not heard, or not heeded him. By the time Stefan had reached the door of the house his brother had gone. Now he stood in the empty village square, calling Mikhal's name. His breath came in short, tight bursts, frosting the cold night air. The surrounding houses were still wrapped in darkness, but in the distance street a house at the edge of the village was on fire. Orange flames licked the night sky, and thick coils of suffocating smoke rolled up the hill towards Stefan.

Moments later a figure emerged from the smoke, staggering wildly from one side of the road to the other. The man was clutching the side of his stomach with one hand and cradling his head in the other. His face looked wet, and red.

Stefan felt his body tense. His hand was inside the pocket of his jerkin, clutching the handle of the short knife as though his life depended upon it. The man slowed his pace as he got closer to the centre of the village and looked up at Stefan.

Stefan recognised him. It was Jan Scherensky, one of the men who worked the nets on his father's boats. His son was a friend of Stefan's; they had played together only a day or so ago. It all seemed a lifetime away now.

Stefan stared at the man in shock. As well as his face, one side of his body seemed to be have been drenched in blood. Something thick and dark oozed from a hole that had opened up beneath Jan's ribs. Scherensky noticed Stefan standing by the side of the road and limped towards him.

‘In the name of the gods, Stefan,’ he shouted, ‘save yourself.’

Stefan was stunned. It was a while before he could reply

‘I can't,’ he said at last. ‘I have to find Mikhal.’

Jan Scherensky knelt upon the ground as though he had been overcome by tiredness. He held out a hand towards Stefan and Stefan took it in his own. He didn't know what else to do.

‘Jan,’ Stefan said, ‘what's happened to my father?’

Other figures were starting to emerge from the smoke and flames at the end of the village. Men carrying torches, marching towards them. Scherensky looked back down the street then turned back to Stefan, his eyes bright with fear.

‘Save yourself,’ he repeated. ‘Save yourself.’

He slipped forward, his forehead cracking hard against the cobblestones. Stefan shook Scherensky's body in desperation, trying to stir him back to life. He hadn't said anything about his father. He needed to be told that his father was safe.

But Scherensky wasn't going to tell him anything now, and eventually Stefan let go, and left him lying in the road. The marching men hadn't yet reached as far as the village square. They were stopping at every house along the way, Stefan realised. The air was filled with the sounds of wooden doors being broken down, glass being smashed. And the sound of the screaming.

The sky flared orange as more and more homes were lit by the flames that danced along the wood-slatted sides of the houses and across their straw-thatched roofs. Soon the whole village would be engulfed.

Stefan saw something move in the shadows on the far side of the square. A tiny figure, huddled in fear by the side of the road. Stefan ran towards him, calling his brother's name above the rising crescendo of destruction all around them. As he reached the centre of the square, he saw the men coming. Two men, taller than any he had seen before, rushed towards him. One was carrying a blazing torch and a heavy axe, the other had something swinging from his hand, a ball or a bundle of some kind.

Stefan froze. He looked into the faces of the men. They were laughing. Their soldiers' clothes were matted with filth and blood. Stefan saw now what it was that the second man was carrying. His fist was clenched around the hair of a severed head.

Stefan found he was paralysed, rooted to the spot. He wanted to reach Mikhal and the safety of the shadows, but could not move. The men kept running. For a moment it seemed that they would run straight past him. Their eyes seemed to look through Stefan as though he wasn't there. Then, at the last moment, the second man pulled up short. The dead villager's head swung from side to side in his bloody hand. Stefan recognised a face. Sickness forced its way up from the pit of his stomach into his mouth.

The Norse tossed his trophy to the ground and turned towards Stefan. He was young, probably little more than a boy himself. His features looked human but his eyes were the colour of blood, set like dark red stones in his smooth, white face. His face broke into an leering grin, exposing a row of sharpened teeth like those of a wild dog or a wolf. He said something to Stefan that Stefan didn't understand, and reached out to touch him. Stefan flinched away in terror and a voice called out: 'Leave him alone!'

Both Norse turned at the sound of the small, frightened voice. Mikhal tried to scramble away out of sight but it was too late. The white-faced monster laughed evilly, and pulled a short knife from his belt. The first man moved round behind Mikhal to cut off his escape. He was whistling.

Stefan heard his father's voice in his head. His fear dissolved, and with it the ice that had frozen his limbs. Suddenly he was running, desperately running to put himself between Mikhal and the Norse. The knife lying in his pocket chafed against his skin as he ran.

He was no longer thinking. Every movement of his body was driven by instinct alone. The younger of the two men appeared not to notice him. His attention was fixed upon Mikhal now, like a snake mesmerising its prey. The Norse

crouched down and beckoned Mikhal towards him. His companion was laughing a cruel, hoarse laugh.

At the last moment the Norseman saw Stefan. As he turned towards him, Stefan lashed out with his feet, kicking the man in the guts. Mikhal darted forward, escaping the clumsy lunge of the other man.

'Run!' Stefan yelled at his brother. The younger man uttered a curse and grabbed wildly at Stefan. Stefan fended him off, hardly realising he had the knife in his hand. He heard the Norse scream. He caught a brief glimpse of the man's face; saw the socket running red with blood where the ruby eye had been gouged out. The Norseman screamed with pain and rage, and struck out blindly. Stefan felt a cold spike of pain shoot up through his arm.

Then he was running, running with his brother, away from the square, towards their home, the heat of the flames scorching the skin at the back of his neck, the voices of the pursuing Norsemen rising above the screams from the village. A sweet smell of burning wood mixed with the stench of the butcher's slab.

Mikhal dashed ahead of Stefan, towards the door of the house that still lay open to the night. Stefan clutched his younger brother by the hand and hauled him along in his wake.

'Our house,' Mikhal shouted. 'Our house is over there!'

'No,' he said, fighting for breath. 'Not there. They're burning the houses.'

'But I want to go back,' Mikhal protested. 'I want to go home, Stefan.'

Stefan charged on past the house, dragging Mikhal behind him. He knew that their lives depended on them keeping going. 'We can't go there again,' he repeated. 'We can't go back.'

'But father—'

'Father will know where we've gone.'

His mind was racing, trying to sift the sounds rushing through his ears. He could no longer hear the voices of the Norse behind them. He began to hope that, for the moment at least, they had lost their pursuers. The dark outline of the salting house loomed up in front of them; the

oddly comforting scents of the sea mingled with the smell of smoke and carnage.

'In here,' he gasped, tugging his brother's arm. 'Hurry, Mikhal!'

The air inside the thick stone walls of the salting house felt still and cool. Moonlight creeping through the narrow slats across the window was mirrored in the silver scales of the gutted fish that lay motionless in their hundreds, row upon row spread out to dry upon the shelves.

Stefan stopped still and held Mikhal to him. He placed a hand across his brother's mouth.

'Quiet.'

Some way in the distance they heard the sound of footsteps approaching the shed. Stefan looked around in desperation for somewhere to hide themselves. Stefan walked between the salting trays to the large open vat at the end of the room where the guts from the cleaned fish were collected, and lifted himself up onto the lip of the vessel. A familiar stench of rotting entrails filled his nostrils. The vat was almost full.

Stefan swallowed hard and called Mikhal over. There was no other choice if they wanted to stay alive.

'I can't,' Mikhal said, horrified.

Secretly, Stefan agreed. 'Yes, you can,' he told him. He took a firm grip on his brother and lifted him up onto the edge of the vat.

'Take a deep breath,' he told Mikhal. Take a deep breath and pray.

Stefan lifted a leg over the edge of the vat so that he was balanced over the mass of stinking entrails. Part of him could not believe he was about to do this. The other part of him told him that he had to.

Mikhal looked at him in horror and disgust. 'I know,' Stefan said. 'But I promised. I promised father.'

He pushed Mikhal backwards into the slippery mass, then followed on, trying not to crush Mikhal beneath him. His eyes, nose and mouth filled with a cold oily pulp that stank beyond belief. Stefan choked and gagged, fighting to draw breath. The darkness enveloping them was total. After a while Stefan pushed an

arm upwards until it broke through the surface of the vat. A little light and air leaked in.

Stefan spat out the vile tasting scraps that had forced their way into his mouth. He whispered Mikhal's name quietly and heard his brother sob a muted reply.

'How long?' his brother whimpered.

'Hush...' Stefan felt for Mikhal's hand in the oily mess and tried to take a grip upon it. 'We must wait,' he said.

At first there was only the silence, and the distant sounds of fighting in the village. Then Stefan thought he heard another sound, closer at hand. The sound of the door being opened. Not kicked apart, like the other houses in the village, but eased open gently, as though someone were playing a game of hide and seek.

He listened carefully, tracking the muffled footsteps around the interior of the salting shed. Stefan felt his body begin to tremble. The footsteps completed a half-circuit of the room and then stopped. For a full minute the silence was absolute.

Stefan held his breath. The urge to look outside and see what was happening was overwhelming.

Then a voice spoke somewhere in the darkness. It was the voice of the white-faced Norseman, the man that he had wounded, speaking in Stefan's mother tongue.

'Boys,' he drawled, slowly, slurring his speech around the foreign words. 'You come out now, be good. You be safe with us. You see.'

Stefan clamped a hand tight over Mikhal's mouth. His heart was pounding so hard in his chest he was sure it could be heard all round the room.

'Boys! You do a bad thing with knife. You got to say sorry now!'

Then a second voice. Stefan couldn't tell what the second man was saying, but his tone sounded harsh, impatient. Outside there was a sudden explosion, and light flashed through the window-slats. Shouts rang out, some in Norse, some in Kislevite.

The first voice cursed in Norse, then shouted out again Stefan's own language: 'I find you, one day. I find you, I promise.' Then Stefan heard the sound of the door

being thrown open, and footsteps retreating into the distance.

More than anything else, Stefan wanted to climb out from the vat. His body was chilled through and soaked in cloying, stinking oil that covered him from head to foot. His wrist throbbed savagely from the encounter with the norse. Yet he understood that the only possibly safe place for the two of them was right there. Somehow he did not think the norse would be back.

He tried his best to hug Mikhal and give him some reassurance. He did his best to find some way of getting comfortable and the confines of the cold, filthy tank.

And he waited, waited for he knew not what.

The faint messages from the world outside changed as the night wore on. At first the sounds of battle had intensified; the clash of steel and inhuman screams of triumph or pain seemed at one point to be ringing the building itself. It was impossible to tell which way the battle was going. He could only hope that, somehow, his father had prevailed and the invaders had been destroyed.

Gradually the sounds receded, fading into the background as the fighting either drew farther away, or simply ended. Perhaps, Stefan thought, the Norsemen had given up. Or perhaps there was no one left to fight. He pushed the thought away, and waited. Miraculously, Mikhal had fallen into an uneasy sleep, punctuated by moans and, sometimes, yelps of pain. But Stefan had not the heart to wake him. Who knew what the new day was to bring for either of them?



STEFAN CAME TO with a jolt, shocked by the realisation that he, too, had fallen asleep. He had no idea how long now they had lain hidden, but faint grey light had begun to creep through the windows of the salting house. Dawn had come.

He listened. Now there was no sound at all, above the steady whisper of Mikhal's breathing. Nothing. Even the birds were silent.

His body ached with stiffness and cold, and his wrist throbbed with incessant pain. Stefan raised his left hand and looked at it. A broad red gash had been carved across the palm. The salty slurry had served to staunch the flow of blood, but the wound was deep, and would take a long time to heal.

He found he had lost most of his sense of taste and smell, which was probably just as well, for he surely stank. Stefan stood up slowly until he was able to rest his arms on the lip of the vat and look out across the salting house floor.

Sooner or later, he knew, they would have to find the courage to venture out. And it might as well be now. He doubted anyhow that he could bear hiding in the stinking vat of entrails any longer.

Everything was exactly as it was the day before, or a thousand days before that. And it was quiet, peaceful even. Just for a moment Stefan allowed himself the childish hope that, somehow, all of that dark night had been just a dream. He stifled the thought quickly and stirred his brother.

'We can get out now. Go and find father.'

'Are you all right?' Mikhal asked him.

'Yes, I'm fine,' Stefan said. In fact he could not remember ever feeling worse. He hoped that once he started walking his limbs would return to normal. He took a few steps forward, trying to ignore the pains and the revolting filth that covered every inch of his body.

The door of the salting house hung open, flapping to and fro in a gentle breeze. Stefan was just able to make out the faint scent of burning wood that hung still on the air, reminding him of bonfires on the Feast Days. He took Mikhal's hand, and led him outside.

The sun had not yet risen over Odensk. The light was cold and grey, misted with the smoke from dying fires. But even in this half-light Stefan could see enough to realise that the village he knew had gone.

His first thought was of the fire in the hearth when he and his father got up at first light. All around him, fires smouldered and cooled.

The village was no more. Where wooden buildings had stood, only blackened piles of debris remained. Only those few buildings made from brick or stone had survived. The wind swept dunes of pale grey ash along the street.

Stefan searched with his brother through a cold new land. Up the path that led from the salting house, towards the square in the centre of what once had been the village of Odensk.

Around a bend in the path their search came to an end.

Stefan grabbed at Mikhal to hold him back, but he was too slow.

'He kept his promise!' Mikhal shouted. 'He promised to come back!'

Even before Mikhal's shouts of joy had turned to howling despair, Stefan knew what they had found. He knew, too, that the door that led back to his old life, his child's life in Odensk had shut forever; that in a moment he would have no choice but to step through a door into another life altogether. The grey dawn was giving birth to a cruel new world.

Stefan advanced a few more steps and sank to his knees in front of the figure lying outstretched before them. Mikhal was sobbing now, pounding the hard ground with his little fists in grief and rage, but, for the moment, Stefan did not hear him.

He had seen death before, seen it reflected in the glass-beaded eyes of the fish spread in rows across the wooden slats. But this was different.

'You're right,' he whispered to Mikhal. 'He kept his promise to come back.'

Stefan's fingers closed upon the silver icon clutched in his hand, but the goddess had no comfort to offer him. He looked to the sky, the pitiless grey sky stretching out above them, and said a silent prayer.

He looked again at death, and death looked back at him through his father's eyes.

Nothing in his life, not even the horror of that last, long night, had prepared Stefan for this. He wanted to understand how this

could be, how the world that had kept him safe from harm through all his years could now have dealt so savage a blow.

He wanted to howl with rage, to beat against the cruel earth like Mikhal had done; but that belonged on the other side of the door that had closed behind him. And he wanted revenge, desperate bloody revenge, upon the men, the monsters, that had destroyed his life. But that lay beyond the door through which he had yet to pass.

He lifted Mikhal gently to his feet. Gradually the convulsions racking his brother's body subsided.

'Stefan,' he said, his voice choked with tears. 'Will things always be like this?'

'No,' Stefan replied at last. He took his brother's hand and held it tight inside his own. His wound hurt, a burning, stabbing pain. But Stefan knew that he must bear it, for pain would be his companion now.

'Things won't always be like this,' he whispered. He held Mikhal within his arms, rocking his little brother to and fro as their father used to do. 'Nothing lasts forever.'

'Where will we go now?' Mikhal demanded of him, his voice beseeching. Stefan shook his head, slowly. He did not know where they would go, but he knew that he alone would have to decide. Gently, he pulled his brother away from their father's body and started back towards what once had been their home. After only a few moments he realised it was futile. Their home was gone; it lay with childhood in a place that existed only in the past. Now they must walk the path that led to the future. Now they must walk the path of warriors.

Stefan Kumansky stopped and looked around him. To the north lay the sea, and the cruel lands from whence the tide of death had swept through their village. That would not be their path; not yet, at least. He turned away from the sea, away from the ruins of Odensk, and faced inland.

'Come on,' he said gently, taking Mikhal's hand. 'It's time.'

Together the two boys took the first steps along the road that lead to the place that Stefan still knew only as the World. The first steps along the long road that would lead to vengeance. ♣

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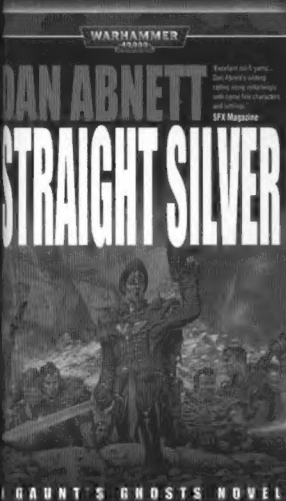
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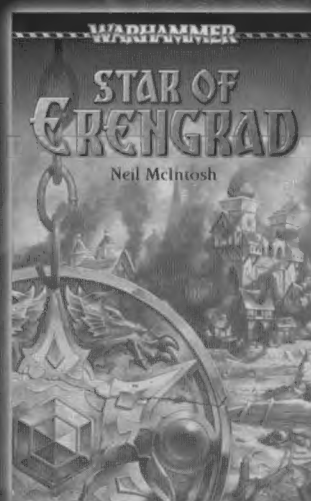
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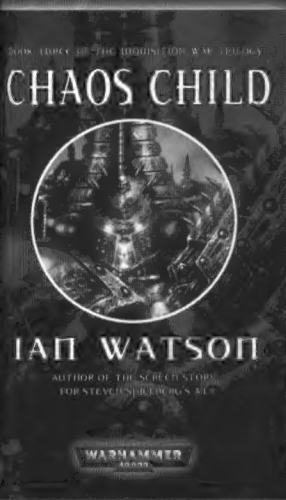
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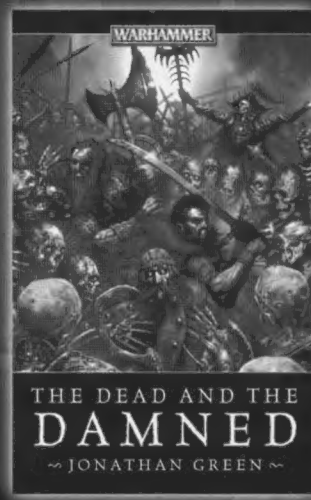
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A noxious smoke, the vile stink of aeons, furred out around the altar. Despite his suit-filters, Priad smelled grave-mould and the corrupted rot of deep tombs, locked away from air and light for thousands of years. There was a sickening taste they could sense even in their airtight helmets. A numbing dislocation. A kaleidoscope of nauseating colours.

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'In the name of Slaanesh – cut me!'

• **WHAT PRICE VENGEANCE** by C.L. Werner

The second man had a single moment to react as Brunner spun the weapon in his direction. Panic seized the man and instead of dropping to the ground, the Tilean fumbled at his weapon, trying to reload it. The second bolt from Brunner's repeating crossbow punched through the wooden stock of the Tilean's weapon and embedded itself in the man's lung. The mercenary fell then, a fraction of a second too late to save his life.

• **FIGHT OR FLIGHT** by Sandy Mitchell

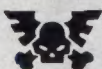
The Hydras were firing continuously now, stitching the air over the compound with tracer fire which looked dense enough to walk on, but the gargoyles were small and fast moving, evading most of it with ease. Craning my neck around for potential threats I saw most of the guardsmen taking whatever cover they could find; anyone left out in the open was in no condition to move by this time as the fleshborer fire and bioplasma bolts rained down furiously. My attention thus diverted, I tripped, going down hard on something which swore at me, and tried to brain me with the butt of a lasgun.

• **THE PATH OF WARRIORS** by Neil McIntosh

Fedor swung his sword, and felt it judder as it struck home, cutting through leather, cloth, or bone – he couldn't tell. His opponent tottered as though slightly drunk, but did not fall. Fedor saw the man's sword arm swinging up towards him. All of a sudden, Fedor found himself possessed by a furious frenzy. He pulled back his sword, parried the blow aimed towards him then struck again and again, hacking at the other's man's body as he might cleave meat from a bone.

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